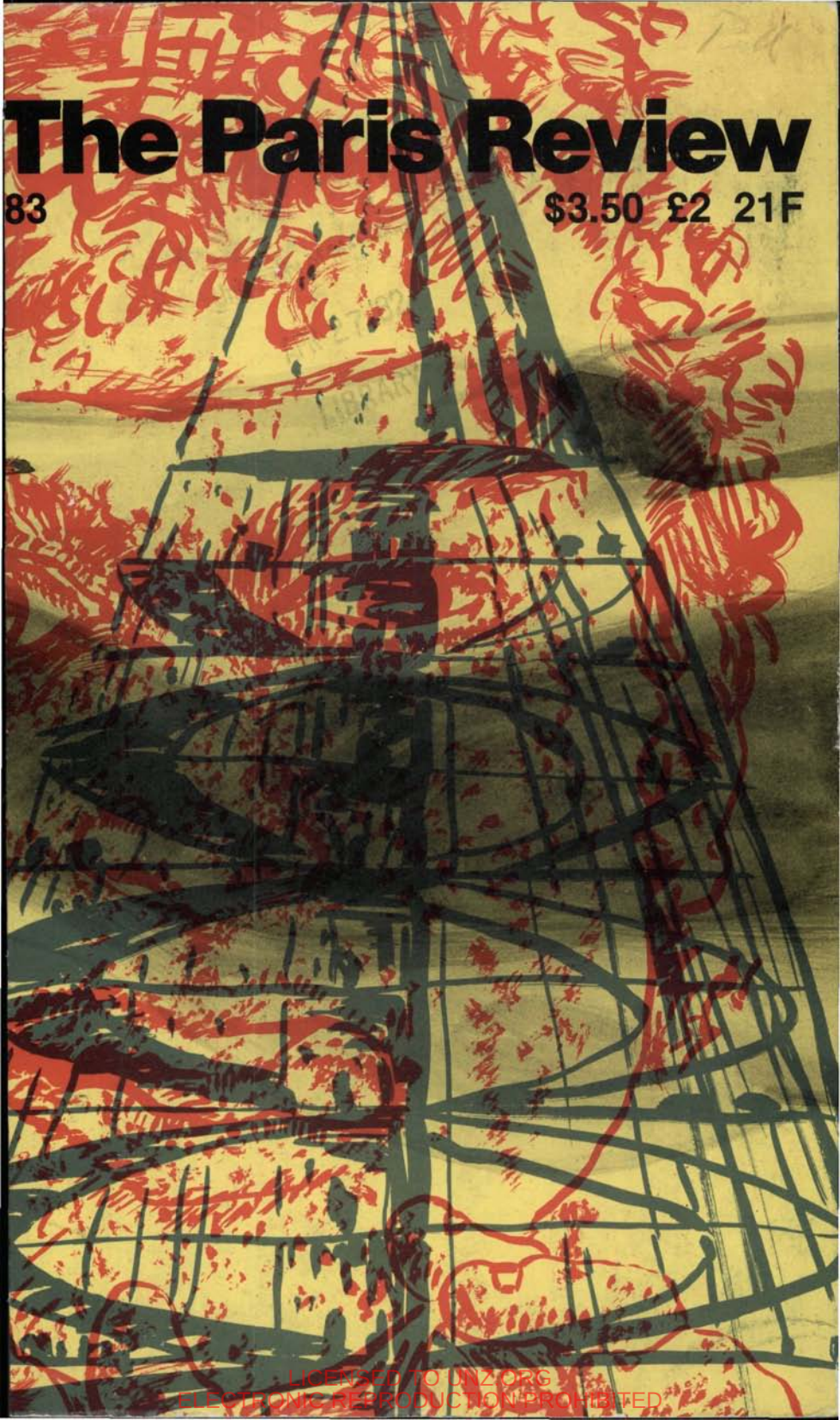


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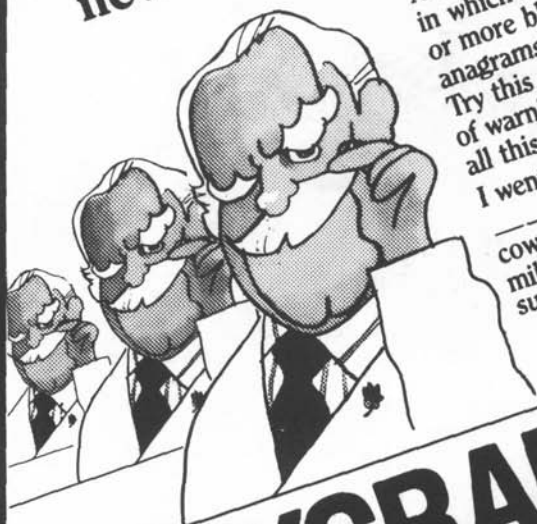
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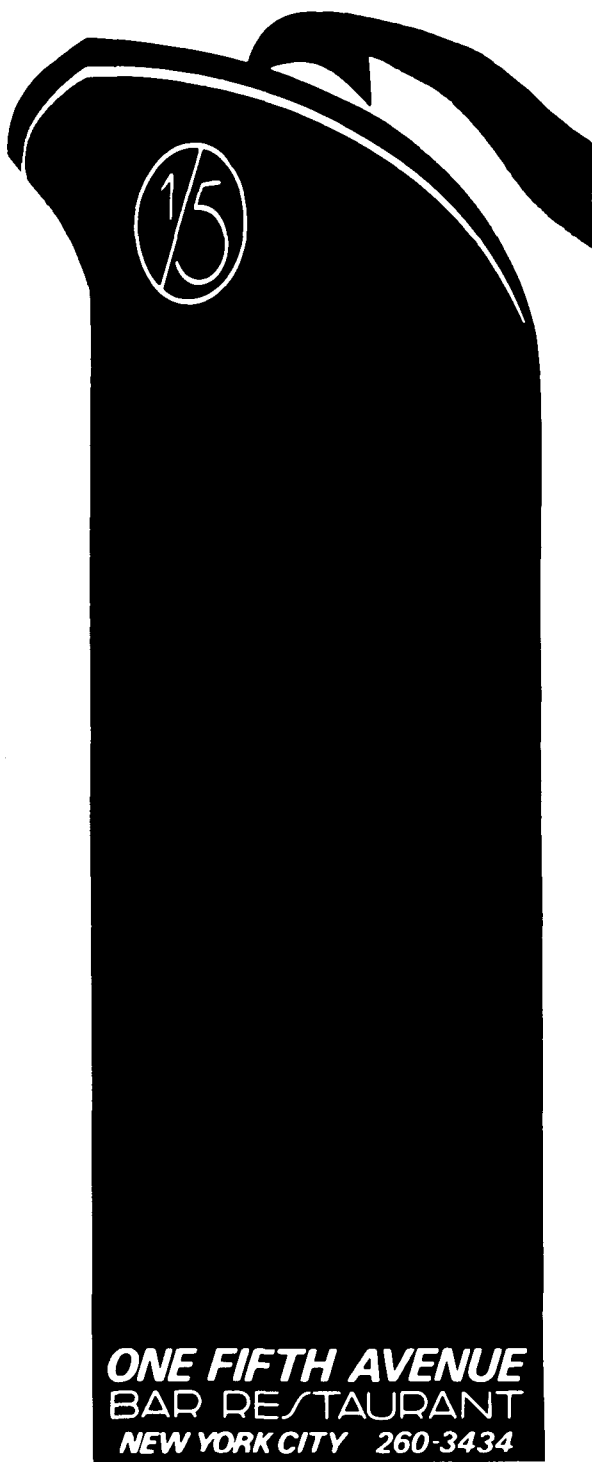
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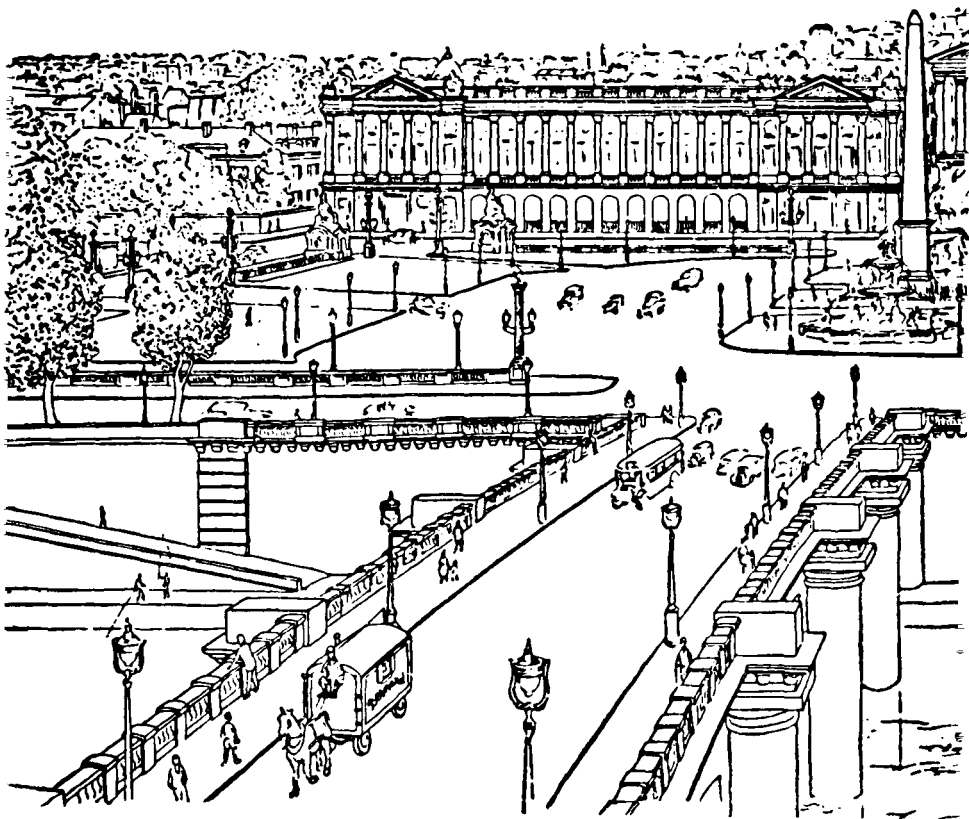
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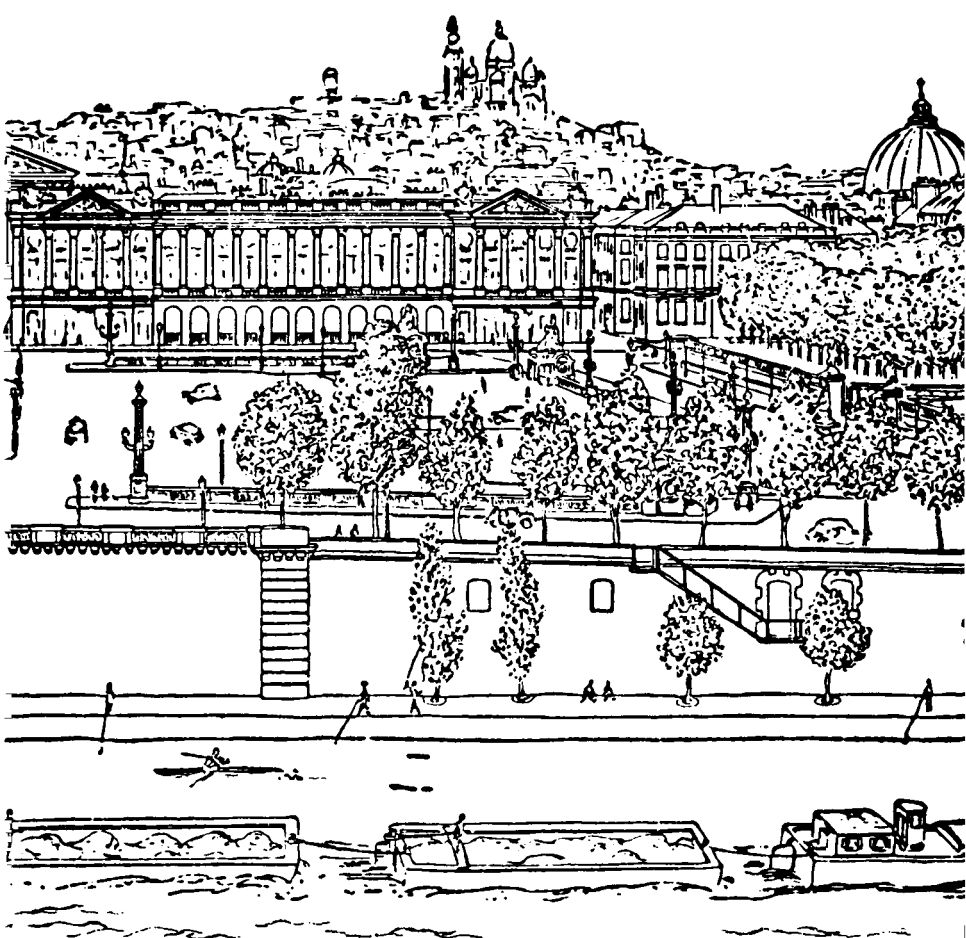
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The Bernard F. Connors Poetry Prize

The Paris Review is pleased to announce that for his poem "Father Guzman," Gerald Stern is the second winner of the Bernard F. Connors Poetry Prize—one thousand dollars donated annually by the former publisher of *The Paris Review* (1976-78) for a poem of over 300 lines.

Samba De Los Agentes

Andrei Codrescu

My name is José, I am Catholic and I was not a plainclothes policeman very long. In Argentina I wrote poetry and prayed to the Virgin every day for my mother who was a cancerous balloon grounded in the chicken shack behind the house and for my two sisters who tap-tapped their way past my window every hour drowned in lipstick and sperm. Here is one of my poems in translation:

Every day is a long hallway to death
Every night is an agony of lightning
My heart lies in pieces at your feet
My poor heart is a trampled field
Bring down the rain, Mother of God

When I first came to New York I was taken under the wing of my uncle Pedro who is a cop. I became a plainclothes cop and roamed the city with two other cops, looking for crime. Because I was the first to spot the nervous, skinny young man playing with a gun in his pocket, I was the first to shove him into one of those doorways which in New York stand for nature, and whis-

per hotly into his ear: "If you move I kill you." I have whispered, shouted, mumbled and stammered that line ever since I remember enough times to get me in trouble. It never did; I think it is a very good line. Skinny didn't move so I slid out his gun like a rubber from a Trojan package and it turned out to be a toy. "What were you doing with this?"

"I was walking thinking up a poem," the man said in an accent as foreign as my own.

"What sort of poem?" I found myself unable not to ask although my next line should have been: "You robbed a liquor store, punk!"

"A poem about the Virgin Mary," he said shyly, beginning to cry. I saw the tear and knew that it was the tear said to perpetually exit from the statue of the Virgin in Fatima. "In it . . ." he pushed on, sensing my interest, "I was going to put my heart which is in pieces."

I took out the only piece of paper in his pocket, a poem to the Virgin by A. Alien, 54 Avenue C, 2 C, New York City, America.

"Where is your green card, punk?" I remembered my next line.

"At home."

So I dragged him to his home to the address plainly written on the paper. There, we busted in the door and found ourselves in a room wallpapered with innumerable poems to the Virgin. The refrigerator door, which was open, contained tens maybe hundreds of carefully washed milk bottles, each one containing a rolled-up poem to the Virgin. "What do you do with these?" I asked.

"Launch them to sea," he said.

I arrested him on a charge of possessing a false pistol, a misdemeanor, and took him to jail. There, I visited him every day until the trial because A. Alien had no money for bail. When the trial came, I couldn't be found to testify. Reached finally at the Police Academy where I was taking classes, I refused to come to court because I was on my lunch break. The case was dismissed, I was fired from the force and I became a hippie and

a film maker, and started writing short stories and a novel.

A prime specimen of the Nixon-Mitchell architecture of the early 70s, the Department of Justice, enfolding in its windowless interior *The Immigration & Naturalization Bureau* like a heart, bakes in the noon heat on the site of a former slum. The edges of the slum, like the extremities of a heart transplant patient, lie bloated all around it, dotted with idle young blacks lying on piles of rubbish, smoking at the sun. Parts of car bodies, only the useless parts, the unsavory entrails of animals rejected by the white middle-class rust, there too, scooped up from the inside. A child probes carefully the sides of a slice of watermelon, its inside, too, scooped up long ago. The freeway, a black incision still unfinished, stands over the landscape, its wire feelers extended toward the river. The earth too is hollow, hundreds of hardhats are digging below, one day trains will rumble through. Everything hollowed out and the sides rotten . . . this is the world to which allegiance must be paid by the poor alien disguised in a blue leisure suit like a bad lyric in a barely hummable song . . . and I go forth to pay it, green card clutched tight, an official shoot within a mannered walk—I almost said manured—my shiny wingtips narrow but properly wingless, my mask in place, the eyes almost fit my glasses which I wear as prophylactics. Today I am going to claim citizenship.

The guard runs his outstretched palms alongside my body glancing all the while at the metal detector needle which registers my keys with a slight tremor. With his palms on my hips I chuckle inwardly at the questions on the naturalization form in my breast pocket. Have you ever committed sexual perversities? Have you had any homosexual encounters?

The hands of the guard became the hands, crossed on a metal desk in fluorescent white light, of the immigration officer “in charge” of my request for citizenship. Hands progress, in institutional neon, from resting on hips to crossing on a desk. In the bureaucracies of hands, these are the hierarchies: the fist, impacting with the face as the immigrant, stumbling off the boat, appears ready to run off into the night past the guards; the index finger curled toward its owner, meaning come here,

worm; the index finger pointing to the tubercular youth with two weeks' growth of beard, singling him out of line for shipping back; the vertical fist hitting the metal desk to make a point out of which, rage spent, could come forgiveness; the crossed hands, which I now face, ready to thumb through a greasy, fat file; the palms spread across the face of the man leaning wearily into them after a long day of silent hate and contempt for the Tower of Babel; the hands, finally, of the man, on the Bible, on his way up. All these hands, at no matter which stage in their office life, never lose the gesture of the guard, which they retain like a water mark.

Still crossed, the hands weigh me. Above them is the mustache of a man tensed between the incoming fat of middle age and the veneer of nearly gone muscle. They now uncross, these hands, to alert me that all has come to a point: the file. A mystery to both of us, the file is going to determine my status. My name, JOSE A., is embossed in red ink on it. The file opens. The man's eyes widen from the first page. So they know everything, I think. They know about the Virgin and the man I failed to jail because of Her. They know about Peggy, my agent. However, I am quite certain, they don't know a thing about me.

"Why have you been driven from the force?"

"For the love of the Virgin, by José!"

"In 1969 you were arrested for harboring minors. Suspicion of sexual activity. What was the deposition of the case?"

"Fiction."

"We shouldn't let your past stand against you. If you tell me the truth there is no reason. . . ."

"My past doesn't stand against me. It doesn't stand against you either. My past doesn't stand at all—I am another person now. I write novels. I have an agent. I am an American."

"There is no reason if you tell the truth why you should not . . . in time . . . become a citizen." He is generous with reason. After all, it isn't *his* reason he's being generous with. It is the reason of the founding fathers who wanted all the orphans. However: the world is full of orphans and he doesn't think the founding fathers meant *all* of them. Why, a man could come

here, display his orphanism and be allowed to shake down the lemons off the first citizen. We must make sure he is a good orphan. Not orphan enough that is to *cry* for love, for chrissakes, not a pathetic fucking *ultimate* orphan... a reasonable orphan, a dignified orphan, a calm orphan.

“Your file raises questions. We will look into them. I see no reason, etc., if one day, etc., if the truth, etc., you may not, etc., one day, etc.”

When I came home Madame Rosa Alvarez had a surprise for me: she flung open the door to my crusty rooms and there, in a circle reminiscent of a village dance, all embroidery, high-heeled shoes and black and red hair, were my mother and two sisters. The result of a miracle still much discussed in Buenos Aires, my mother had deflated and her cancers had been sucked out of her. The renowned psychic surgeon Xavier Urmuz had had his picture in many papers as a result, particularly the dramatic one which shows him stepping on wriggling brown spots pouring out of mama's body like hailstones through a grass roof.

My mama became a rapid American, so rapid I took her to Atlantic City. And for a moment there I panicked: I thought I'd lost her. Looking over the dazzling rows of madly whirring, bright slot machines, each one facing a wrinkled middle-aged woman in electric green polyester pants, I couldn't tell which one she was. It was a movement that gave her away: a jerky, spasmodic upward twitch of greed which made it seem as if she was pulling the machine off its black stem. Cherries whirled past and apples, and out of the tumbling fruit, something of mother appeared. Getting closer I noticed the fierce and familiar pursing of her lips in what was her unique and ancient quarrel with fate, or luck as she sometimes called it. Luck, luck, ran through her lips, in a flow of mixed syllables in various dialects, some have luck, some have all the rotten luck. She had already forgotten her miraculous cure when faced with the evidence of her machine-neighbor, her identical image, her fellow bus-passenger, pulling showers of silver out of the air. Before the coin she proffered to the secret quarrel with her destiny had even reached the insides of the machine, she pulled it hard and stalled it. Every time, she had to duplicate her movement, as

the arm of the one-armed bandit would not comply the first time around. This double movement, notwithstanding the miracle, running as it did through her whole life, divided her days and nights. Her days were now dedicated to achieving the semblance of an American woman with whom she competed for blandness in endless shopping sprees which were fast draining my sisters' hard-earned whoring money, and which yielded the same plastic colors as the stuck slot machine. Her nights were occupied by the dead. Useless to resist, unresponsive to medication, contemptuous of doctors, the dead came to her every night to converse, ask and answer questions, as much at home in her dreams as they had ever been. Her grounded years in the chicken shack had been crowded with dead people, her shack had been the coffee house of the necropolis. They had all come with her to America now, happy like all new immigrants, a dream come true. For the past two weeks, I had been sleeping around, unable to listen to the wild cacophony of my mother's dreams. My sisters, who were used to it, said that it was this constant dead talk which had driven them from home at night in Buenos Aires. By the time they had had her removed to the chicken shack it was too late: they liked what they did. For the past two weeks, my mother had been teaching her dead English until dawn. When the last of her quarters brought forth a mixed bag of grapes and cherries, she turned to me and sighed with the satisfaction that I, at least, looked exactly like everyone else, an investment which she had made earlier and which had, unlike the *pure* operations of luck, paid off. She had no way of knowing that the blue suit of which she was so proud—she had sent it to me by boat—had only been worn once before, when I had gone in to ask for citizenship. In her mind I was always clad in the blue suit, and when I wasn't she didn't see me. Invisible in my childhood, I was still partly invisible. Unfortunately, I *was* partly visible. This is the part which writes prose.

I made small talk with the man ahead of me, No. 15, on the bench at the Immigration & Naturalization Bureau. He was Romanian. He told me that, contrary to popular belief, Dracula was a man of the people. He was man enough to impale them. He boiled people. He stuck a lid with holes for heads over the cauldron people were boiling in. He ate in front

of the boiling with relatives of the boiled. He nailed people's hats to their heads if they didn't remove them fast enough. He made dishonest merchants swallow their money. He nailed thieves to one another and impaled them horizontally on the dotted line. He poured poison into people's ears. He saved Christianity from the Turks. He invented nationalism. His portrait hangs in classrooms all over the country. He has been maligned. Then his number, No. 15, was called, and I was next.

"We have perused your file, José. We have half-looked into your soul and found good things. We know that you are a writer. What have you written, José?"

"A guide to fucking in the great cathedrals. A guide to gargoyles in ten great cities. A spiritual guide to gambling. A Transylvanian in Disneyland."

"How do you make a living?"

"I am a philosophical fashion arbiter. I decide what colors the ideas should wear."

"Do you make enough to eat?"

"Enough for Shrimp Imbecile for two. Sizzling flied lice, too. Flied polk! Oystels! Egglolls! Watel! Evelything! I am a well-fed American who doesn't even moan in his sleep. . . though the silence was terrifying at first."

"I sense a bit of resentment. An old wound, perhaps?"

"Yes. The wound winds all the way around my body, through the air. My aura is unzipped. A kind of spare lyricism attends my movements. Sometimes I am Spartan and hemophilic at the same time."

"That sounds like a paradox."

"To find a true paradox you must dig at least six feet. I sense nothing of the sort. True, I have had many serious, late night discussions with people in the know. The world is dying."

Getting up from his desk, the Immigration agent looked furtively around then closed the door. He winked. I understood from his automatically lowered voice that his inner police ear had been activated. He implored me to listen to his position. He spoke cautiously, as if behind every word someone or something waited for him with a slingshot. He tested each

word in his mouth, prodding each letter with his tongue. Even to himself he appeared as a conscientious consumer making sure of each tomato before buying. But his words, when finally released, turned over and bought, came out tired, boring and insipid settling in their reasoned predictability on me like flies on the summer sweat of a bald pate. I have no idea what he said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I can’t tell you that. Suffice to say that under the circumstances we will have to keep working on your file until every shadow of doubt is erased. The whole world comes through this door: Vietnamese peasants, Cambodian spies, Cuban killers. And writers, you know. . . . I have here something a writer once wrote, I flushed it out. . . .” He handed me a dog-eared mimeograph pamphlet entitled DIALECTIC OF TERRORISM OR THE PLEASURES OF EXILE. Leafing through it I saw underlined: *Rely on your basic transparencies*. On the margin, a hand had scrawled: *Pictorial key to terrorism*. I saw also *Happiness is a loss of integrity*, and on the margin: *Psychological milieu*. On the back cover was a picture which looked like random meat after a TNT blast. The caption said: *Fragments of a Comrade*. “Needless to say, we had the author deported. . . .”

“Why?”

“Anarchism. Subversive milieu.”

“I have arthritis of the milieu,” I confessed.

“On the other hand,” he continued without hearing me, “we have a writer who not only deserves to stay, it is a pleasure keeping him.” He handed me a poem. Here it is:

COUNTERREVOLUTIONARY SONG SUNG BY THE
WHITE GUARDS IN THE UKRAINE 1921 IN PRAISE
OF THE UNITED STATES—A NEW TRANSLATION
BY name deleted

At the small arms seminar
Vera and I whispered about Lenin’s bananski

There isn't any said Vera
He left it behind in Indianski

The mountains are covered with manna
We have only just begun to fight
Like the corn in far away Indiana
We will conquer the Bolshevik blight

At the small arms seminar
Aliosha inserted the firing clip for Anna
A snow drift came from the mountains
As beautiful as the hair of Fata Morgana

We will stomp each Bolshevik with our boot
Like a wiggling scarlet piranha
The mountains will be free forsooth
And we will be famous in far away Indiana

I handed it back.

"You know," said the agent, carefully folding it in four and putting it back in his suit pocket, "to this day the Cossacks are very famous in Indiana. In my little town we have the Cossack Inn, a White Tower, and we have a corn ritual where we sing Cossack songs."

"How long then?"

"No one knows. Form's just benign content, as the doctors say. . . ." he said, waving my application, "but content may well be malignant form. . . ." He pounded my file.

My sister Tabita's boyfriend gave her the crabs and now she can't work. She's been told by everyone, myself included, to get rid of them but she demurs. Crabs, she says, are jewels from Venus. She clings to them as if they were ideas, she says that at Lourdes Christ's tears fall on his toes and turn to gelatin and then his greenish fungoid feet soft and wobbly walk over the minds of His worshippers. Would you remove his tires? she screams. I am no less attached to the ancient rottenness of my whimsy! she hollers. I try to talk sense into her:

"If Christ would think of us as fondly as you think of your

crabs, Tabita, we would all be in Heaven!”

But there is no talking to Tabita and now there are crabs everywhere: in my hair, in my eyelids, under my arms. I didn't even sleep there and I got them. Just by sitting down. And as I get up I can't make up my mind if the little beasts have colonised or inhabited me. Likewise, our earth must at times ponder this question. I know it is not an appropriate moment, at the very beginning, nay, before the second chapter of *The Queen of the Morgue* (as I retitled my ghost job), to ponder this, but nevertheless: when writing, am I colonising or inhabiting the language? Until Peggy, I would have laughed this question off as utterly stupid. Until then I had been sure that words came to inhabit me, little astral spores in search of a mouth. Shortly after I thought well perhaps I am inhabiting them though Lord knows *what* inhabits them if that's the case. Bad enough as that proposition was it can't compare to the criminal magnitude of colonisation. And yet, as a still honest—though barely—ghost I must ask. That this sort of inquiry is utterly inappropriate in a ghost was made abundantly clear to me by my ghost agent who having just read the first chapter of *The Queen of the Morgue*, tells me that my “love affair” with the American language is somewhat one-sided: as if I'd persuaded her to give me an unreluctant hand job and then lost her phone number. There are true ways of writing a story, you little prick, even if I have to—as you never tire of pointing out—make the old bag look like Mary Queen of Scots and her ghoulish departed hubby like Sir Galahad, ways of making it believable at the very least. Truth is like rooms one looks for in strange cities. You don't know the neighborhood but you have to trust your idea of a room even if it's only the fact that it's got to have walls. But try fighting conformity with your feet in the goo: the material is like a rubber tree. No one is ready for the slightest bit of truth. But don't worry, it isn't you who points the gun at my head. The hand that types is the hand that squeezes the trigger. And rocks the boat that rocks the cradle, as Tabita says when her boyfriend implores her to be normal. I must remember, in whatever twisted fashion, to allow language to breathe, ah, ah, scratch scratch.

Tabita's crabs and mama's poltergeist have turned my habitat into Luna 4, I can't even eat lunch there without drama. The poltergeist, a recent escapee from her nightly cafe for the dead, turns chairs over. If I look away from my bowl it turns the soup into my lap. On a mild day, it's only Tabita's feather hat floating around the room and the dead flies in mother's Inca Cola swaying from side to side and the glasses in the cupboard toasting each other in an intimate sub-tinkle. I can live with that, but on bad days it breaks windows, snaps legs off chairs, breaks mirrors, twists doorknobs, lifts up the couch, aims knives and forks at the flesh. On days like that interpretation wears thin, the severe diet of faulty premises begins to show itself as ribs, I see the skull under the peachy skin, I feel like Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf all rolled in one, my face half in shadow.

Tabita's boyfriend, who plays guitar, plants his mournful physique and his untuned instrument a few steps over my sleepy head and lets go fortissimo all night with such classics as DON'T WAIT FOR THE SHRIMP BOATS HONEY I'M COMING HOME WITH THE CRABS or THE ALBINO SEX POT BLUES which, when added to the amplified gravel of mama's soccer-crowd-sized company and the poltergeist crashing the furniture, and the wailing of New York City in heat, seriously put language on the block. And they say America is running out of energy! Bring on the Argentines! I'm having so much fun I can't remember my name. And Madame Rosa Alvarez threatens to evict us.

The Red Square in Moscow is full of people looking up expectantly to Brezhnev as he is about to speak. Suddenly: a sound like that of a field full of grasshoppers in August breaks the silence: a million men are pulling down their zippers at once! And another time, when the lack of meat drove everybody crazy in Russia, the crazed Russians poured across the borders into Romania and ate raw all the cows grazing there. And those are just some of the things that go on behind the Iron Curtain, No. 15 told me.

No. 15 was ensconced in my former bed in the middle of my

apartment, tended to by my mother with wine, and by Raquel with rhythmic brushes of her breasts across his chest.

“What about Dracula? And did you ever become a citizen?” I asked him.

Dracula, he said, was Gutenberg’s son. After Gutenberg printed his Bibles he printed a book on Dracula’s atrocities. This was the first mass produced book in the world and the world’s first taste of literacy. Dracula made print successful and the vogue it has enjoyed ever since was rooted in him. The ink of that early tale about the blood he spilled is indelible. The content of cultural democracy is a horror tale. The blood he spilled issues forth from the source of the modern mind like sperm from a bull. “I am not a citizen yet,” he concludes.

Raquel had broken the house rule. Even Tabita was not allowed to bring johns in, she had to work wherever the light was dim and the place deserted. Tabita is obsessive and therefore certain things are forgiven her, like her fondness for dwarves and her passion for crabs but even she does not work in front of mother. Raquel, on the other hand, is a murderous fury clad in outward calm who glows like a brilliant panther when aroused. She has been known to murder and mutilate and will no doubt do it again when the moon is full. I am afraid of her because she is full of intricate canals through which flows a crimson substance which isn’t blood. So instead of throwing her on her ass out the window followed by her john, which everyone tells me I must do if I hope to assert my authority, I prefer to make conversation. Authority to me is like sleep linguistics. Words in dreams, awkward flights over rooftops.

“But you must ghost Dracula’s autobiography,” I tell No. 15. “If direct violence is unadvisable, you would do well to sell the object of your distaste to the devil. But he is not stupid, this foreigner. He sips his wine like a fox, intent on citizenship. Dracula, who was the father of the modern state and the inventor of nationalism, stands firmly behind him, with one hand on his skull and the other on the book. “Justice,” he says, “cannot be established without terror. Ivan the Great copied Dracula. As did Machiavelli. The fatal flaw of Western democracies, the United States chief among them, was to transform

Dracula from a voice of the State, which he has always been, into a private citizen with a taste for blood. You can stake an individual through the heart, bury him at the crossroads, lop his head off with an axe, transfix him with a hawthorn bough and quarter him, but there will always be another individual ready to rise and take his place, or another movie. No wonder he's bigger than Christ! Where Christ merely offers his blood like a wimpy liberal, Dracula takes it!" No. 15 became so excited he stood in bed and lifted his wine glass high over his head. His swollen member fell through his spidery genitals like a monkey through ferns, touching the red top of Raquel's hair. My mother took her pulse compulsively and I saw large drops of blood on the ceiling. In the tiny film of light winding through the blood drops, history marched in rags, endless waves of men covered with wolf hair. Yes, his tale had to be written and I said so again but mainly to recover my body which has a tendency when excited to rise up on a flood of adrenaline and leave me stranded among dictionaries. But No. 15 was drunk and making doleful sounds of wooden instruments, his hands—he had dropped the glass and crashed it to the floor—drumming on the ceiling from which protruded two boars' heads covered at the neck by tight skins, his feet pumping two wolves' clawed feet which operated an accordion-like contraption formed partly by Raquel's bosom, and his cock banging solemnly my sister's echoing skull.

This is when Madame Rosa Alvarez burst into the room, her flat yellow mug streaked by orange tears, her hands in the air:

"Tabita is dead!" she screamed.

"She is not dead!" No. 15 screamed back at her. "She has gone to marry the sun! The moon and the stars will be her bridesmaids and the heavens will look on her wedding! The moon will wear a red velvet dress and the angels of God will hold their gold mirrors to her face so she could see how beautiful she is! The angels of God are blind but their mirrors see for them! She will marry the sun and the sun will shine on earth to tell people how happy he is with his bride! On beautiful summer days you will be able to see her sitting beside her husband the sun greeting you!"

“She is dead I tell you!” She has been positively identified!” shrieked Madame Rosa. But at the moment the room was flooded with light and the sun which had been in the clouds for the past few days came through the crepe curtains and put roses on everybody, so we all knew that the old landlady had been lying. Tabita herself came in a few minutes later to say that she had been stretched naked on the roof hoping the sun would come out because she was “white as milk and freckled as a general’s map,” when Madame Rosa had burst into tears over her and ran off screaming “I knew it! I knew it! The bugs have killed her!” Madame Rosa shook her head adamantly and declared: “You were dead! I saw it with my own eyes! If my husband was still alive, God bless his soul, he would throw you all out like rabbit bones from the stew!” She shook her head violently from right to left, Tabita shook hers from left to right, mama began to shake hers, Raquel shook hers and No. 15 shook his up and down—only I, in midst of the storm that shook the tree, kept mine still because I needed it to think with.

It is a cliché, I know, but within the confines of a policeman’s uniform there often beats a huge, trapped moth, the tips of his wings brushing frantically against the sides of the ribcage. In my old police soul this butterfly beat so furiously it burst its cage and that’s how I came to beg for lemons and film. It’s an old story, made complicated by the fact of police love which is that the euphoric sadism of power can never have enough to feed itself. Policemen, like the rest of us, want boundless love, and they die for lack of it: they want to bind, be bound, beat, be beaten, piss on and be pissed on, and more than anything they want the butterfly to stop the agony of its thrashing. And like the rest of us, they eat to still the ache, and eat, and eat, spaghetti, sausages, egg foo young, cheese, meat, pies, candy and bacon. The more they eat the more insatiable they become: the spirit is a bottomless hole. Cops have been known to aim their service revolvers at their chest where they imagine the head of the moth is and fire deliriously. Often, this wild firing does no more than enlarge the hole into which they then pour redoubled portions of pasta, tomato sauce and leftover

casserole, until they become so large they have to be given an official reprimand and ordered to trim down. The fat cop is a tragic creature, the victim both of a furious desire for the world and of a crazed butterfly in his chest.

I am telling you this so that you may understand the spirit in which I am teasing my Immigration agent who, frozen with terror and suffering in his chair, faces me, his butterfly wild and out of control, fluttering visibly and ruffling the hair on his chest. My butterfly, freed long ago, calls and sings to his butterfly, trying to lure him out to mate. I am being cruel, nay, sinister as I improvise the prettiest canzones ever hummed and ever woven, as I dive and circle and pirouette and shoot golden pollen. Come, my darling, I sing, let's make a four-winged being, enter each other until no one can feel the seam, let's be utterly crazy and demonically deliberate, let's give the horse space a whack with our wings until it shoots through time, obscurity is hateful, let's proclaim the approximate clarity of feeling, let's whip out of the sordid history of the police body into the coolness of the night, let's create en route the solid delights we can't imagine!

"Level with me, José! I have no time any longer for shots in the dark!" he pleads.

"Yes," I agree, "The dark is bigger than all the rifles."

"Once, I too . . . considered being an artist . . ."

"Oh . . . what happened? Did she leave you?"

"How did you know?" He is surprised, but in pain.

How did I know? Because she is written all over him, just the way she sprawled that afternoon on the Peruvian blanket with cones and spirals everywhere, ready to make him into an artist, a devotee and an ecstatic until, later that evening, she left for the jungles of the Americas with two men she found sleeping in a bus station with their heads on motel Bibles and chains around their necks. Yes, my sweet judge of citizenship, you still reek of her, her smell is indelible, she was the only one who knew the secret of stilling the butterfly. And your idea of the kind of art you were going to make wasn't bad either. You had noticed—thanks to the vision she lent you for one week—that people made all sorts of involuntary gestures: a pat on the hair,

a fingernail in the crotch, a wink, a grimace, a gentle tug at a stray hair, a knee jerk, an opening or closing of hands or buttocks, raising one shoulder or another, a tip of tongue darting out. . . and you conceived, in a reverie, the possibility of having these involuntary mannerisms replicated in stained glass. You saw a church rising out of the floor, composed entirely of representations of coincidental movement arranged by you in classic religious scenes: the wedding at Cana, the stations of the Cross. After the vision you saw, for the week she gave you, people's willed and ordinary beings were framed entirely by their unconscious gestures. You even saw though too briefly for understanding that a great deal of devotional faith inspired people to move in ways which they knew not.

"What sort of artist?" I asked.

"Oh. . . stained glass. . . nothing much. More of a crafts thing really."

"That makes you almost a foreigner. If you would like to emigrate to art I will be happy to look into what I can do to get citizenship for you," I said. "Artland has stricter entry requirements than the United States of America. To come to the U.S. you need merely a clear anti-communist conscience, proof that you always screw on top if a man and on the bottom if a woman, a mouth clear of boy cock, alas, a whole mind in shock over the mere fact of cock if a man, cunt if a woman, no aristocratic titles, not even Discount, no hidden hate of taxes and no authorship of even minor crimes like drinking hootch at fourteen, am I right? But to gain admittance to Artland, ah! You must, first of all, remain vague while the circumstances are attacking or circumstantial when vagueness does, then you must be nobody, you must divest yourself of your person, your class and your property not to speak of your so-called mind and your opinions, you must allow yourself to lapse unexpectedly into metaphorical Corinthian, let no one take you for granted, you must make sure that everyone knows including yourself that you are capable of perpetrating any enormity at any given time, and never under any circumstances must you finish your sentences, you must never know how a sentence will end, you must escape confinement continuously, that is, you must never

serve your sentence, you must brutally uneducate yourself, the world is a speech malfunction, the simplest things must be a complete mystery to you and you must approach them with the eternal idiot questions like a child bearing flowers to the enormous tractor leveling the old cemetery, you must live verifiably in the huge emptiness between possibilities and decisions, loving the former, amusing yourself with the latter, and above all you must always be amused, you must destroy agents, editors, censors and representatives of the state as often as possible, all dirty tricks permitted, and you must approach the universe in a militant fashion because you make it up as you breathe, also you will allow yourself to be kidnapped by all and sundry forms of whimsy and will refuse to follow plans, you will not set foot where anybody wants you to but you must visit Plato's Republic as often as you can so that you can be thrown out of it, you must not above all believe in art or any other forms of confinement, you must inspire madness, impossibility and confusion, and on the ladder of discarded negations, with a mouth full of grass, holding a lit bomb, you must climb at all times into the movies which you must trust are being shown in their entirety, any questions?"

"No" he says, "only one. Can I visit your place of residence? It is routine."

"Sure. Put your coat on, man, and let's go. My mother and sisters will be delighted, I'm sure, they love doctors, lawyers, engineers and the rest of the middle class. In fact, there may be some already there so you won't have to feel out of place . . ."

"No, not now. How about tomorrow?"

"Fine, but I don't think you'll get into Artland with an attitude like that. But who knows, maybe the moth will bust out . . . if properly coaxed, goodbye, goodbye."

When I say that mama cleaned up . . . well, maybe you know what happened to the two girls who every morning swept up dust into the eyes of the sun. The sun turned them into the stars with the broom, up there by the Southern Cross. Well, if the sky had been in the mood he could have turned mama and my two sisters into meteorites, moon vapor and echoes, because

the three of them swept dust into the rising sun and the milky moon, sweep sweep sweep all day and all night . . . and when they were done sweeping they tore open mama's collection of liquid, gaseous and solid cleansers, everything advertised on TV since they had come to America, boxes and boxes and bottles and bottles which until then had been piling up in pyramids behind the bed, dresser and in front of the full-color poster of the Virgin, covering up her robes and the left foot of the Holy Infant. Simultaneously, grainy blue powers foamed on the walls and liquid plumbers burrowed through the pipes. Bombs exploded causing roaches to migrate, long sorrowful lines of refugees leaving under the door crack for the neighboring apartments. The windows became transparent for the first time in memory, letting in a view of dirty windows across the street behind which startled fat nudes watched early morning television. The mattresses were beaten savagely, stains cracked and springs moaned. The floors vied with the boots of old-fashioned sergeants in reflecting our faces. The ceiling could be read like a coloring book through hundreds of exposed layers of ancient paint. "Now if I could," mama said, "I would like to clean up the street of all these dirty houses, this one first of all, get rid of all these people, wash the sidewalks, suck all the dirt out of the air and move New York out of New York."

"Ugh, look at this!" Tabita exclaimed, pointing to the screen of the old TV she had just finished scrubbing and sponging. "Now you can see what people are wearing!" Indeed, the game show host and his guests shone with new-found details. Ties and shoes stood out distinctly. Tabita touched one of her breasts fondly but exclaimed mournfully: "All these freckles" We were all naked because our clothes were boiling in the kitchen, spewing clouds of steam. Our bodies, dissimilar only in the distribution of skin, loose like a crumpled wino bag on mama, taut and stretched over breasts and hips on Raquel and Tabita and pinned niggardly to my pointed bones, were otherwise and for all theoretical purposes, the same body, particularly in the pubic area which was stamped by four identical pyramids of red hair. Known as "the Amazonian forests of First Avenue," my sisters' bushes were legendary where such

legends circulate. It would have been inhuman and unnatural for these lush growths to contain no life and here was the rub . . . they teemed with it. Mama had tried to pour a bottle of A-200 on Tabita while she slept but she'd awakened screaming genocide and hadn't calmed down yet. "You might as well kill me too" she repeated every five minutes. Raquel tried to talk sense into her: "They are just like roaches, only smaller . . . you don't seem to speak up for roaches, do you . . . no one else is either" "That's tough!" screamed Tabita. "I can't champion all the bugs in the world!" I saw her point: the roaches had no apologist, no house critic, but they could take care of themselves. The crabs needed Tabita the way corporate publishing needs *The New York Times Book Review*. The only concession we were able to extract from her was a solemn promise that she would not scratch herself during the Immigration agent's visit. I don't think a visit by the Pope would have caused such a promise from her. Only Immigration had such power and I never understood why until later events revealed that Raquel was in love with No. 15 and No. 15 had twice attempted suicide when denied citizenship, and Tabita loved Raquel more than anyone else in the world. Our household was a household of love and one person's beloved crabs were the others' beloved crabs no matter what we happened to think of them. And that is how it came to pass that amid the shining cleanliness, an oasis of purity in the heart of New York, only a few crabs, the more visible for being the sole survivors of a truly American cleaning binge, made their accustomed rounds in the forests of our beings.

But just when it appeared that all was in order and in pristine readiness for the visit, tragedy struck. The lush use of Lysol, bleachers, Clorox, detergents and soaps in the water, destroyed our clothes. Every last piece of cloth has boiled irretrievably away and there wasn't another garment in the apartment. The water in the cauldron had turned into purple paste. My blue suit had merged with my sisters' lingerie and my mother's polyesters had merged with our Argentine flannels.

Only four hours remained until the visit, a time mother had deemed sufficient for the clothes to dry but now we were in

trouble. Raquel picked up the telephone to call No. 15 to ask him to purchase anything he could find but the telephone was dead. It seemed that in scrubbing the walls Tabita had dislodged the connections. Either that or one of the powerful detergents had corroded the apparatus. There was only one thing to do and what was for me to wrap myself in the plastic shower curtain with the Hoboken angels on it and go to the store, and this I did.

Roaming the streets in transparent plastic, o bards, is no big deal in our city. I noticed many hundreds maybe people in similar attire. . . I had never seen them before which confirms my law of New York which is that you only see your own sort of humans in our great city. . . depending on the speed of your walking and the demands of your eyes. . . rapid businessmen with swinging briefcase see only their own kind. . . parallel to them but slower is another world and parallel to that is a yet slower one until you arrive to the motionless bums who see only the motionless. . . and parallel to the worlds of speed are the worlds of tweed, cotton and plastic likewise aware only of each other. . . so it was no surprise really to see thousands of Hoboken angels dancing on grayed plastic around the bodies of an entire social subclass. But when I got to Orchard Street where all the affordable clothes are I saw that I had no money. In our haste to boil our clothes we had boiled away our wallets and purses also.

One thing to do then. I walked into the crowded offices of the Manhattan Chemical Bank and stood in line. When my turn came I advanced on the teller, a spry Puerto Rican blond standing on 20-inch platforms, and said: "Lean over the counter as far as you can and look down. . . you will see a weapon pointed at you! Take all the money in the drawers and put it in a blue deposit bag or these are the last words you hear!" To make my weapon as visible as possible I filled my mind with the curves and buttocks of my filming days and I bent in memory over the deliciously spread body of the adrenaline-filled love of my Buddhist-burning days, and helped these images with my hand, up and down. The teller leaned far over the counter and looked down and saw the weapon grinning at her and pointing

straight at her ruby-lipsticked heart-shaped mouth. "All right," she mumbled, and filled a bag with cash.

Loaded with clothes and feeling not a little crinkley and quite a bit squeaky in my brand new striped green suit and tight wingtips I flew up the stairs of our apartment, convinced that a rush of bank robberies by penis awaited our mimetic city in the next few days as soon as the *Daily News* hit the stands. I had purchased lush silks and expensive shoes and exotic perfumes and Persian rugs. I opened the door, dropped the huge parcels and saw that I was too late.

Sitting stiffly in the better of our two wooden chairs, was the Immigration agent, his eyes riveted to the square tips of his shoes, which slipped on the waxed floor back and forth, while facing him, on our other chair, was my naked mama, making conversation. On the bed, with their legs crossed, and their arms around each other, my two little nude sisters smiled large fixed smiles like birds about to attack a ripe plum tree.

"Yes, you should have seen my little son in Buenos Aires. Always praying to the Virgin, always reading . . . reading and praying, he was an angel he really was . . . would you like to see some pictures?" Mother got up and removed from a trunk the carefully dusted photo album, exposing, as she bent over, her ancient wobbly buttocks atop her jiggling old thighs.

"Here he is at ten, in our parish church . . ." Mother moved her chair closer to him so he could look. She put part of the album on his knees while another part rested on hers. "Here he is with the statue of the Mountain Virgin of the Eight Miracles when she came through our town . . . little Joselito didn't sleep for many nights before she came . . . he prayed and cried until his eyes were red . . ." Page by page, the devoted little boy went on his knees from icon to icon and statue to statue, crying rivers of tears.

"I brought you some clothes" I offered, directing their attention to my bundles. "I hope I got the right sizes . . ."

"Ah!" said the agent, "I'm glad to see *you*! Your mother and sisters were kind enough to entertain me but it is you I have business with. Could we go into another room?"

"I am sorry, there is no other room. We could sit out on the

steps. . . .”

“No, that’s fine. We can sit here I suppose, if your family doesn’t mind. . . .”

“No, no,” they all hastened to reassure him, moving off the chair and beds to examine my purchases. They tore open the packages and a storm of underwear, skirts and blouses broke over the room as they lifted their legs and their arms to slip them on, and bent and shook to adjust them.

“You have an understanding family,” said the agent, “We place great value on harmonious family life. The family is the base of our way of life!”

“Yes, I have been blessed that way. I am lucky, I really am.”

“I like your mother very much. She is a fine lady,” he said, *but what he meant was he liked Tabita very much because his eyes were glued to her hips.* “Are your sisters married? Do they have young men?”

At this point, the door burst open and No. 15 rushed in, one of his arms in a sling and the wrist bandaged. “You!” he exclaimed, when he saw the agent. “I almost died because of you! Where is my citizenship?” He took a menacing step, holding up his wounded arm.

“Regulations . . . forms . . . it isn’t up to me . . . procedure . . .” he was visibly alarmed. “We never determined how you came to this country. . . . Where is your green card?”

“I told you how I came. I flew, that’s how. I lost my green card in the parking lot in Hollywood! What more do you want from me?”

“There was no record of your flight!”

“Of all the nerve! Every bird between here and the Black Sea can vouch for me! I even smiled at the stewardesses on a transatlantic Pam Am jet and they waved at me! Jerk!”

The Agent stood as if to leave.

“No, you don’t” grinned No. 15, a large blackened and calloused paw on the official’s shoulder. “Not until I tell you what we do to tax collectors in Transylvania.”

In Transylvania a tax collector was lacerated bit by bit, until his reason was destroyed. Often, he was attached to a chair or a bed hung from a horizontal arm attached to a pillar in the

middle of a damp dungeon or a cave: by means of a system of gears the machine was set for any degree of speed. The rotatory machine gained speed slowly until it looked hell-driven and the sufferer's pockets shook loose all the pillaged taxes while his reason fell away in spasmodic chunks. The inventor of the rack, a Transylvanian nobleman named Baron Von Bruckenthal, refined this machine to such heights of perfectability that in 1731 an imperial tax collector was completely dismembered by the centrifugal force and pieces of him were found as far as Vienna sticking in the weather vanes of some of the finer houses on Elisabethstrasse. Later, it seems, new techniques came into use, including the infamous "tax collector music machine" which was inserted into the body through what was called "a rigorous system of organic and moral penetration." It consisted of tiny disks resembling roll music for the player piano which were put inside the intestines, the brain and the spine. Seven strong fellows with wooden hammers hit the wooden keys of the machine a little distance from the tax collector who then began to fill up with music and start to hum and reverberate louder and louder until all his internal organs started dancing madly. The music eventually attained such frenzy that all the whirling and waltzing organs exploded, merging inside the man in a furious and indistinct sea which rose in a single wave and lifted the body into the clouds, pulling him off the disks. "And that!" shrieked No. 15, "is only part of the story!"

There was only one way to anesthetise No. 15 so he wouldn't harm my fragile link to citizenship, and Raquel took it. She dropped one of her large breasts into her palms where it fell with a heavy plop and she introduced the nipple into No. 15's angry mouth which closed immediately and began to make baby noises. "There, there," she said, patting him on the rough black brillo pad most Romanians seem to wear on their heads. "There, there," and he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

When the agent saw he was out of danger he became indignant: "That man!" he grunted. "To every simple question I asked him he replied with riddles! Fairy tales! Vampire bats! I said 'Have you ever been arrested?' and he gave me the history of his twelve cousins' cardiac arrests! He probably doesn't have

any cousins! He doesn't even have a mother I'm sure of that! He's a down and out orphan with a big mouth!" The agent half stood, shaking his finger, while Tabita nodded gravely, agreeing with every word. He now addressed himself entirely to her: "Some people think we are robots! No respect at all for what we represent! And then they want to be citizens! Sometimes I think I'm being punished with this job for sins from another life but of course I don't believe in that nonsense! Believe me after a day of the strangest gibberish in one thousand different accents I'm ready to hang my hat!"

"Hang it! Hang it!" cried Tabita, falling into his arms, "Hang it on me!"

He had no hat to hang but he held on to her as they both fell on the floor and wriggled there utterly penetrated, he by red-haired Argentine heat and she by compassion and a big man. I prayed No. 15 wouldn't wake up and he didn't. Mama got up to fix some snacks because she knew they would be mighty hungry when they got up off the floor. I was rather hungry myself—emotions render me famished—and I rocked back and forth on my heels, abandoning myself to the familiar and lovely sounds of my now wordless household, No. 15's snores alternating with the contented suckling sounds of his lips, the agent's and Tabita's ahs ohs *madres dios* gods oh my gods oh fucks, and the sizzling heavenly aromas of frying hot peppers, thin slices of marinated beef, bubbling beef bones and fresh bread coming out of mama's pans and ovens. Ah, yes, even everloud New York appeared to have been stilled outside the window in hot afternoon sun. All was peaceful, quiet and safe.

Sometimes, not often enough, the world is like this, gently immobile in an eternal Sunday afternoon. We stop our banging and clanging for long enough to taste the sweetness of things at ease, their hard edges softened, harshness gone or out of focus, something dimly remembered flows sluggishly through the body. A gaucho, asleep on his horse, stands still in the pampas. There is no wind, the animals sleep. On the half-eaten head of a cow the flies stop buzzing. The maggots too take time off for a nap, stretched lazily in dark tunnels of food. Sudden peace illuminates the eyes of the man dying in the

house next door: he falls into it like a fat snowflake on a white field. I am six years old and I am watching him, not moving. Later, when the adults come back, I tell them how the Virgin came in softly and took his soul with her. They too can feel the peace. This peace is a gift, you cannot buy it and nowadays for the people my age it comes more and more rarely. Only violence can at times bring it up briefly, often with death in tow. And there are many to whom it never comes. It never comes to dreamers who have become cops. The price for re-entry into the society which hated them is half the hate, which they must take into themselves to lighten society's burden. A true Sunday afternoon comes only to those able to make their experience public and this they are forbidden to do by the self-hate with which they bought their way in. The prodigal son is an anomaly, he fits nowhere, he has denied his past but has no taste for the present, his parents do not want him now, they want him then, the labor market will only take him grudgingly and then at a substandard wage, he suffers all the agonies of a turncoat and none of the pleasures of forgiveness except money and money is garbage so the only place short of death which he has also forsaken in favor of old age is Tabita's pussy and in it he goes, up and around, up and up, up and out, unaware that myriad-legged swarms of Venusian jewels are migrating onto his body, riders of the storm awakened by heat. The content of his revelation, the fleeting beginning of his abandoned art return briefly in orgasm without the mushy edges of political hysteria and they are public for the first time in his life because I am watching carefully and mama too, her pan full of sizzling red peppers held in suspension briefly, because this is one of the few moments that bear watching, being both incomprehensible and totally true. But we aren't newspapers, of course.

No. 15 woke up mythological, throwing his startled body out of sleep with a stream of curses invoking fabulous beasts and was about to strangle the agent who was struggling to his feet with pants around ankles, when mama served the food. We ate it and with each dish we became sadder. No. 15 remembered the food of his country and began in low monotone to recite the names of all the dishes of yore. It was a litany of the

dishes of Transylvania as beautiful as a funeral dirge, and it seems that indeed, at funerals the people of that country recite the names of all their best dishes over the body of the departed in order to remind the angel of death that the deceased is on that special diet and will not have anything below par in the next world. Mama became sad because the peppers and the tomatoes were not the way she remembered them: they tasted limp and airless not at all like the robust vegetables of Argentina. Raquel was sad because every time she ate she got a little fatter and one day would come when she would be too fat for love. Tabita was sad because in reaching inside the agent she had found only a terrifying and whistling emptiness and now she wasn't hungry. And I was sad because the world is sad and my loved ones were very sad but my sadness was happy like rain in the fall. I was sweetly sad and not at all unhappy. The agent, of course, was sad because he didn't know what he wanted from these people and worse he didn't know who he was anymore, and the food was foreign and it didn't warm him.

He left with his report unwritten, the first time it had ever happened. He strolled aimlessly through the river front park. At one point he felt what he took to be a prick of his conscience but it was only an itch in his chest hair. Soon another false prick of conscience which again was only an itch below his abdomen. As the pricks began to multiply he thought well, maybe it is my conscience after all, I was derelict of duty. Soon his entire hairy body seemed to be on fire and the passersby slowed down to take a long look at the madly scratching bureaucrat set on fire by his conscience. By this time he had almost ceased looking human as he leaped and jumped like a shaman deer-dancer trying to pull off his skin. He ripped up his shirt and drew long bloody lines with his nails. They went up and down his body, deep and crimson like railroad tracks. Trains of maddened guilt ran on them at great speeds. His pants and shoes and socks came off next as he contorted and rolled into balls of pain attempting to tear open parts of his body he had never touched before. It was not much later when the moth in his chest, temporarily stilled by Tabita and by the hot peppers, began to flutter frantically inside him. This redoubled itching from the

inside awoke in him what can only be described as the collective guilt of world bureaucracies. The unfulfilled nationalisms and sadistic racisms of all the buried strains in the dream of the uniform attacked him with the fury of their incompleteness. Every new itch said "We counted on you!" and every letter of that reproach was a line of red ants berserk in his body. I could barely keep up with him from the distance I was following. But I knew he couldn't recognize me any more. So I came closer.

"Don't move or I kill you," I again quoted myself.

I killed him. I pushed him into the river where, instead of swimming, he continued to roll and tear at his insides until a long rubber object the likes of which float only on the East River and nowhere else, wrapped itself around his neck and squeezed the air out of his lungs. He sank rapidly and I knew that it had been a mercy killing.

Gerald Stern

Father Guzman

I

Lillian Russell, I think of her standing
at the rail of the *Nieu Amsterdam* as it sails
through Caracas to get a taste of the real slums
behind that ring of mountains; and I think
of Mae West beside her and Miss Columbia in
red, white and blue, and a French maid
with a white apron and a little white hat
carrying cocktails. A small boy is there
swimming with the rats
and toasting himself in the broiling sun.
He recognizes Simon Bolivar, Abe
Lincoln and Lillian Russell;
and he adores the Indian squaw
and her husband, Chief Pontiac,
and the loving couple with the
toilet seats around their necks.
He turns to Father Guzman, a Maryknoll
priest whose head was broken
by the National Guard and rubs him
behind the left ear where the swelling is.

BOY: That is Lillian Russell looking
as she did when her full length portrait
hung on the wall of the Pittsburgh *Leader*
in full sight of Ambassador Moore
practicing Spanish on his Jewish secretary.
And that is our own Abe Lincoln, and that is

Simon Bolivar, the George Washington
of South America. There is a statue of him
in Central Park not far from the Plaza
where the chauffeurs move their Chryslers and Cadillacs
from one side of the street to the other
to stay ahead of the traffic tickets.
I wish Bolivar had died before the battle
for small pie had begun; I wish Lincoln
wore a shawl on the little brown penny;
I wish we could have lunch, you and I,
at either the first or the last sitting
and finish our brandy just as we were
steaming beyond the third reef.
I think, when my turn came, I would dress
like one of the anarchists of Valencia or Barcelona,
and you could dress like President Cleveland
taking up the cause of Venezuela
in the name of the Monroe Doctrine,
or you could be that sad Abelard
and I would be your Heloise,
or we could pick up one of the pretty girls
playing the pin ball machines at Castro's
and dress her up like a twelfth-century nun,
full of displaced love, or converted hysteria.
Ah, my heart bleeds for Bolivar, doesn't yours?
Say something, you American pig, you big saint!

GUZMAN: Ah, you think you know everything. Do you
know that two American policemen were in the
room where I was beaten, that they carried
loose-leaf notebooks full of typed information
in Spanish and English and they quietly turned
the pages while I died from pain? You know
how ichneumon breed? You know they lay their eggs
deep within the flesh of a living incubator
and that the larva gnaws at the host's vitals
until the last organs are gone and then pupates
in the empty skin? You know the common fly

has 33 million microorganisms
flourishing in its gut and a half billion more
swarming over its body and legs? You know
that Bolivar always left to his vice-presidents
the tasks of pity? You know
that Bolivar was more like Don Quixote
than he was like Washington, that he adored
Napoleon as well as Voltaire and von Humboldt,
that he could not abide taking orders,
that he turned his back on atrocity,
that he militarized the mind,
that he abused men of color,
that he was a kind of conquistador,
that he feared peace more than war,
that he was never able to stabilize one nation,
that he loved being named president for life,
that he stupidly trusted the British,
that he hated beggars and illiterates,
that he repressed "dangerous" themes,
that he was a Caesar, that Abe Lincoln
was also a Caesar, that Lillian Russell was obese,
that the Mellons have a plan to betray the universe,
that Nelson Rockefeller was an ichneumon and
David Rockefeller is a house fly?

BOY: Ah, dear Father, I will never betray you.
Sit with me in the slime here and we'll pretend
that we're in Rio or the south shore of Long Island,
brushing the white sand off our legs. Poor Bolivar,
he freed his own slaves in 1811, he didn't know
the value of money, he had a
truly original character, he was
anti-clerical, he was romantic,
he was eloquent and wise and practical,
he was the greatest American of the nineteenth century
and, like me, an orphan at the age of 15.
But let us discuss Venus, Bolivar's favorite goddess.
Talk to me about Abelard, for you have read

everything, and you haven't been a priest for nothing.
Tell me why life always destroys these lovers.

GUZMAN: Oh, you are an asshole, you are an asshole, but
I love you!

Life does not destroy lovers, there's no plan
in love any more than there is in war or politics.
Which war do you want, which election, which business
deal?

Everybody's grandfather missed by one hour
the first turnover in Kodak and R.C. Cola.
Poor downtown Miami, I heard they
were lined up all the way to Orlando
to buy that swamp! One more day,
or maybe two, and Humphrey would have won
and Nixon would have ended up his years
on the board of the California Arts Council
or the first president of American Cocaine
or a justice of the peace in Upper Black Eddy, PA.
Can you name me forty battles, or just thirty,
in which a horse's knee or a small rain storm
or spoiled milk decided the gruesome fortune?
If Abelard's dumb semen
had only run down his leg instead of through
those blond gates, where would all that suffering
go, and all those wistful letters?
What good does it do to say, "I'll watch her lips,
I'll stand by the phone, we'll move
always together," when a little milk—or water—
can end all that. I am only
a Maryknoll priest, a crippled missionary
with cardboard boxes, but I have seen enough
of what you call love to last me a lifetime;
and I have read de Rougement and Goethe,
but I prefer to talk about this slum
and the nature of oil capitalism,
and, anyhow, that other is the kind of philosophy
that Stephen Crane and Thomas Hardy practiced,

embarrassing to read, even to think about,
too much German, not enough Japanese or Greek,
a little even like those mad naturalists
from France and California, Humphrey Bogart
doomed from the start, the banditos always waiting.

BOY: I like Plato best of all, the cardboard souls
reaching out, and I like Werther weeping
over his Charlotte—if one must commit suicide
the best way is through an open window, the worst
is pills, a knife is painful, a gun is sudden
and pretty good unless the spring is tight
to test your will; walking into cars
and sitting in garages which they do
in North America is too bourgeois
and enigmatic, and as far as the ocean,
well I wouldn't want to change my mind and struggle
up those salt hills and down those foaming valleys.
Ovid's *Art of Love*, have you read that?
The first two parts are a kind of handbook
for men, the third part is for women.
I love the modern touches, the shocking references
to cough drops and deodorants,
and I love the intimate knowledge he has of women
and the pity he takes on men.
Do you know the *Koka Shastra*? I love that too,
even more than Ovid. Everyone knows
the *Kama Sutra* but this is a little different,
something out of the Middle Ages,
a little shiny, a little in the shadows.
There is a section on kisses, a section on love-blows and love-
cries,
one on women by age and temperament,
one on the physical types and their seasons.
The section on plural intercourse
really turns me on,
a man and two women,
a woman and three men,

including detailed descriptions
of play and penetration.

I like what Kokkoka—he's the poet—calls
the masculine position, where the woman carries
out intercourse after the male fashion—he also
calls it the inverse position; no big deal;
it's when her lover

is tired, or when they've gotten into a rut,
or when they just do it for fun; she acts his part
either from the start or turning him over
after intromission has taken place.

If she's astride him and she bends her legs
and makes a rotary movement it is the "wheel."

If she moves like a parrot, from side to side,
it is the "swing." This is different from the woman
sitting on top facing the man's feet.

Also there are other variations
such as the "fish," the "lotus" and the "swan,"
involving bellies and heels and clasped hands.

Sometimes a woman likes this, she is free
to do what she wants with her fingers and her hair;
though sometimes she prefers to be taken
halfway from behind like a lovely mare,
her face turned away from him in ecstasy
while his hands move over her breasts and thighs.

The best time for intercourse is after
a woman is tired from travel or convalescing
from a fever or weary and hot from dancing,
or at a reunion after a long parting
or at a reconciliation after a quarrel
or when the lady has been drinking or swimming.

A man can remain indefinitely potent
if during intercourse he turns his thoughts
to rivers, woods and mountains. If he imagines
a small monkey swinging from a tree
he will not ejaculate even though his semen
is already at the tip of his penis.

It is bad taste, and dangerous, to imagine

your mother's death, or think about problems. You lose everything while trying to keep your distance.

GUZMAN: Stop, stop, you're going crazy! Oh my poor boy, you would love New York City,
from the bus station to the library,
from the post office to the Royal Manhattan.
I would like to walk with you past the bars
and the mounds of garbage and the peep shows.
I would like to stand with you in front of the book stores
and look at the men inside facing the walls
and rocking, the pages shaking in their hands.
I would like you to see the displays—you and Kokkoka—
the large double dongs, the life-like vaginas,
the cork and screw vibrators, the electric love penises.
I would like you to open a copy of *Screw*
and look at the ads in the back, the whores and prisoners,
the swollen breasts, the cries for whips and enemas,
the appeal to race, the dirty secrets.
I would like to buy you a gyro
or a piece of Kentucky Fried Chicken
and take you into The Dating Room or make you
sit for hours in the front row of the Avon
watching the boy and girl on stage
trying to fuck in front of the dazed patrons.
I would like to give you 200 quarters
and send you into the booths, the lonely
confessionals where all your hopes are settled
in a little square of light and one by one
your dreams are ruined and your fantasies replaced.
I would like to watch you after a day
with the cocksuckers and the male whores.
—I remember a tiny room where I took
my clothes off once and climbed on a hospital bed.
It was on Eighth Avenue near the Port Authority,
a block away from my favorite Greek restaurant.
The girl's name was Cheryl; I think she was crippled
but I liked her because of her name

and because she had a baby girl in the front room
where the others sat and waited for trade
on broken-down sofas and flaking chairs.
I remember she asked me if I wanted
powder or oil, I remember the ridges
on her back when she leaned over to touch me;
I remember her hair and her brown skin and her nipples
and her white halter and her plastic boots.
I asked her if I could touch her too
and she smiled behind her busy devotions,
but when I reached down to kiss her,
when I tried to lift her face
and touch my mouth to hers,
when I half rose to hold her in my arms,
forgetting those cardboard partitions,
forgetting, in my loud cry, where I was lying,
she pulled herself back like someone who had been struck
and spoke to me in the voice of hatred
and unappeasable rage,
suddenly unguarded and without restraint.
My orgasm was weak and silent,
half apology, half punishment,
and I lifted myself down from the bed like a
slave, white and beaten.
I think I walked for hours after that
up and down the quarter,
trying to recover from my emptiness.
There was some solace from the movies,
though I don't remember what was playing—
I mean the wholesome ones,
The Street Gangs of Hong Kong
and *The Body Snatchers From Hell*
at the Apollo and the Liberty
where the little families from Bronx
line up for their tickets,
not *They Came To Play* and *French Trade*
at Eros I and The Venus.
I ended up at the Holland Hotel

staring out at the parking lot and the old post office.
Nothing I could do could stop me from remembering
the linoleum floor and the bottle of Scope and the dead
 flowers
in that little cubicle;
no prayers, no discipline, no humorous system,
could wipe out the memory of the coat rack
and the waste basket and the lubricating jelly;
or the degradation of holding the plastic basin
full of soapy water under my genitals
while she washed me like a bored mother;
or the moment of terrible dizziness
as I rushed past Nedicks
and Whelan's Drug Store.
I wanted to burn my seed! I wanted to die!
I saw the gold! I saw the Indian mystery!
What Raleigh fought for, what the insane Spaniards
dreamed of for a lifetime. I saw the
issue of their violent quest.

BOY: Here is a Coca-Cola, a little warm
from the sun, but I kept the flies away
by pressing the lid back on; I buried it a little
in the sand—a natural refrigerator,
you know, for fleas and aphids.
I have a friend
who prefers Coke to wine, he likes to measure
the number of fluid ounces in a bottle
of wine and see how much it costs
compared to Coke. If a bottle of wine
costs ten cents an ounce—say a bottle
of Christian Brothers at \$2.50 a bottle—
a bottle of Coke
at the same price would be sixty cents,
twice the price we pay at the commissary.
You yourself told me
Coke once cost a nickel a bottle
when you were my age—I wonder what it cost

to buy a bottle of wine in 1940?
—There is true love in the universe, you know that!
Think of Dante! Think of the Duke of Windsor
giving up his throne for Wally Simpson!
Think of Cleopatra drugged unconscious
to keep the pain away!
Think of Dostoevsky
rolling in the icy drifts.
Come on! The sun is so hot my eyes are starting
to blister.
Do you think I'll go blind before I'm 25?
Do you think there is a doctor in New York
to save me? Do you think they'll write me up?
Poor little boy from Venezuela, flown
by special jet to New York City—dozens
of women waiting to get my autograph!
Lunch with the mayor! Supper with the president!
Come on, the sun is hot now; let's go in!
Oh lovely precious man, you shouldn't weep.
Tell me about the north. Oh, tell me again
about the snow falling on the river;
tell me about the city, tell me one more time
how you walked up that avenue singing.
Tell me about the windows, how you stared
at the mystery behind the blinds.
Oh dearest precious man, oh lovely priest,
oh brother of mine, oh brother and father and teacher,
so worn out from your life, so sad and exhausted;
you I love more than my own flesh and blood.

II

GUZMAN: Today we're going to have an egg with our bread and butter. I am an expert on eggs although I know you think you know all about it. All the world loves an egg. It may grow tired of red tomatoes, it may grow tired of corn, it may grow tired of steak itself, but I can never see it rejecting eggs. They are the fruit of life, the source of all our dreams and the heart of all that's beautiful. Think of eggs piled up in those boxes! Think of those chicken houses in Maryland! Think of those barns in Pennsylvania with the light coming in. I remember eggs that floated in the water like the white eyes staring at God, and I remember eggs that lay on their straw like small kings turning to stone. Sometimes it is their meat and sometimes it is their shells and sometimes it is the colors and designs but they are the perfect symbol, they are earth and heaven combined and they are the bridge between. —Here we go, a little water on the yolk to make it steam, a lid to cover it and in a second we will be sitting down at the Waldorf watching the waiter wheeling in the gold.

BOY: Dearest love of mine, I am so hungry I could eat your broken arm while the other is hanging like a bird in the air holding the salt up during your lecture. I'm afraid to say one word or I'll end up starving while you go through your raptures. I know what's about to happen but to me an egg is an egg, and if I sometimes

slip the wild taste brings me back. I want to
talk about eggs with brandy and eggs with cinnamon
and eggs with mayonnaise rolling down the sides;
and eggs à la Russe and eggs Nevada,
and barbecued eggs and baked eggs with mustard,
and eggs with onions, and eggs with liver,
and for a minute forget the egg as a mystery
and all the folklore and science in it.
Besides, the egg, I hear, is an abomination
in North America and people eat them
as if they were eating poison or taking medicine.
If I were the president of North America
I would put a little sign—in red—
on every carton, “Caution, may contain cholesterol,
keep away from happy people,” or put them
in giant jars that nobody can open
unless they know the matching twist. You know
a human female lays 480 eggs
in one lifetime; you know the egg
of a Leghorn hen weighs about two ounces
and an ostrich egg weighs three pounds; you can put
33,000 hummingbird eggs into
the single egg of an elephant bird without
breaking the shell. . .

GUZMAN: . . . Why do you make
fun of everything? Why is life
a joke to you? Why are you obsessed
with useless information? Your nervous
speeches, your leaping back and forth, your
rhetoric, is just a mask. If you had the money
I think you’d buy one of those huge boxes
and walk down Broadway holding it up to your ear
the way they do up there, or you’d roller skate
with thick earphones around your head making circles
around those poor dumb Germans, whining
away in Washington Square. It is the staccato
of the oppressed, the drums and the compulsive
tapping and the stuttering—don’t you see you’re like

this? Why do you run away? Why do you always
change the subject? Why do you make your faces—
my little friend, my angry orphan,
so brown and noisy, so small and cantankerous?

BOY: Because I don't want to talk about Utopia
today and I don't want to talk
about the Golden Man and I don't want to
talk about the tragedy of Venezuela.
I know more than any fifteen-year-old
in history does about the lost dream
that holds us together and the voyage up that river;
and I know about the spices and the golden threads
that tied the German capitalists to Spain
and the golden disc that the king of Mexico
sent to Cortez and the fever of the Christians
and the poison harps of the Indians,
but I would like to swim today and I would
like to swim without pretending I'm shaking
gold dust from my arms
while you stand in the mud moaning
and dropping colored stones in the water;
and whatever else I don't want to talk
about Campanella and his crazy Italian mind
and Rockefeller and his rotten connections.
In fact I think I'd like to paint all seven
continents on my little world before I peel it
and gulp it down in one huge bite or maybe just
nibble at it the way those sea lions you talk about
nibble at orchids in their salt lagoons
where we all started—right?—floating on our backs
and spitting water up at the white sun.

GUZMAN: Listen to me! Without a dream you'd die!
This slime of ours would fill
the whole world! What is amazing
is that we climbed out and sang
the way we did. What is amazing
is now and then there was a rotten board

or hairy root or slice of sharp stone
and we moved up enough to see there was something—
even a bald stinking hill—
above our eyes, and if we stretched it
we could see what it was like when trees
came down to the shore. Maybe there was
a solid wall, broken only here and there
by something lighter, with tremulous leaves,
or larger star-shaped leaves, and maybe they
were adorned with pink begonias or flowering vines
exhaling a sweet perfume; and maybe birds
by the hundreds came down to drink, egrets and herons
and giant toucans and harpies, and out of the woods
pigs and jaguar and deer; and tapir and sloth.

BOY: The dream I love the most is where the steps
come up to the wooden porch and there's a rug
to put your feet on and the copper bells
chime in the wind. I love wooden steps
when they are soggy, after the rain, and inside
it's dark and still and maybe there's a piano
with yellow flowers on top or a window sill
with books piled up. Oh, I understand sometimes
the meaning of heaven and maybe I'm lucky—
at least you say so—to be born like this
on the bottom, so I can start from nothing,
so it's easier for me to see what I'm missing,
even to put things in their order. It's heaven on earth,
I guess, cool air coming from the water,
lying there asleep with my two hands
on top of the sheets. Sometimes I wait for hours
for the morning and even half-dream about it, eating
my orange, walking through the peppers, bending
down to pick the beans, stroking the sugar babies;
and looking up with happiness at the zinnias
growing beside the ruined squash,
as if something useless had to be there,
something just decorative and foolish,
finally living in wonderment

without misery and sickness and hunger,
my whole life changed.

GUZMAN: I find myself looking for justice now
in the strangest places. If anyone would have told me
five years ago that I would be going back
to what I thought about and dreamed about
in my twenties I would have laughed my hyena laugh,
but now I relive those days over and over.
I wish I had the chance again
to march down Broadway twelve abreast, singing
songs about poverty, cursing the rich and stupid.
I wish I was struggling in the tents
invoking the rules of order, standing up
on those wobbly chairs, sobbing over what
we lost in those lumpy beds. I was betrayed
by hunger, I was ruined by kindness,
bribed and beaten, one hand stroked my forehead
and the other hand smashed me in the chest and stomach.

BOY: Poor chest and stomach. I would give anything
to have been with you in those tents, to have lined up
in Columbus's Circle or Union Square
before the march. What was it like
to walk with the people, to meet your friends, to stuff
those newspapers in your pocket, to look up
at the windows while you marched, to steal a guilty
wave to someone working there, a tailor
with thread in his mouth, a girl with braided hair?
What were the speeches like? What did the cards
and banners say? Did you clap hands? Did you shout
in anger or happiness? What did the cops
do to stop you? Did they sometimes weep
on the sidelines wishing they could join you,
their guilty thoughts staining their blue uniforms?

GUZMAN: I never for a minute lost sight of the dream,
and while the others marched, mostly thinking
of full employment or racial love or disarmament,

my mind soared. I read all night, you know,
and I could remember obscure connections
and wonderful facts, which I whispered aloud to myself
when things got boring or dishonest or silly.
You laugh at my love of Campanella
but I was moved by him,
even after I knew how strange he was,
even after I knew about his cunning
and his madness. I loved the man
and his ideas both; I loved his stubbornness
and his courage. He was tortured, you know,
for forty years but never broke. The future
age will judge him! When he was thirty-two
he already knew the worst. He saw himself
as Prometheus bound to the rock, as Christopher Columbus
whom everyone mocked, as the bell-tower
calling men to drink their mothers' milk,
as Jesus himself—the new Messiah—poor Jesus,
whose life was a prefiguration of his own.
When he was seventy, finally living in freedom
as a guest of France, and his books were being republished—
in the king's name—he didn't change one word.
That's what I call a man! That's a man!
The City of the Sun has weaknesses in it.
How could you make a perfect society
without flaws—or even craziness? And we have
the advantage, don't forget, of hindsight,
and we have different passions and interests,
but what he says is worth thinking about,
and some of his ideas could still work.

BOY: Look at you being rational,
as if it's just a book you're talking about.
I think you worship him!

GUZMAN: I worship his spirit.
I worship his vision. Whenever I think of him
I make a thousand connections. A world of
beauty opens up. I feel exalted.

—I love his mysticism, what he does
with numbers, how he uses names—
the names of his princes, “power,” “wisdom,” and “love,”
names for the Trinity,
Potesta, Sapienza, Amore,
all serving under the *Metafisica*,
the great king of the sun who collected
everything into himself and then gave it all
back again—like rays. I love his astrology,
his city with seven rings, based on the planets,
the constellations under the central dome,
war and love and business guided by the charts.
And I love his love of work, that is the key
to everything, the holiness of work,
not the neurotic self-induced slavery,
but work that can imagine an end to itself,
a true Sabbath. And I love his views
on property and family and community. He believed
in sharing it all, he believed
the way the children of the sixties did, and
the true communists before them—and Plato before *them*—
although with a difference, there’s always a difference,
but doing away with private property and marriage,
this he believed in—or taught at least. And I love
the way he adored the mind and the pleasures he had
in learning, and disputation, and the connection
with all the other southern Italians, Bruno,
Thomas Aquinas, Pythagoras, Empedocles.
And I love his whimsical soul, the walls of his
city covered with the whole history of knowledge,
like visual aids in the twentieth century.
And I love his heresies and plots, his affection
for his fellow Calabrians, his kinship with the poor,
his hatred of Spain, his hatred of Aristotle,
his battle with sophists and hypocrites,
his messianic fantasies, his search
for innocence and perfection, his love of white clothes,
the elimination of jails from his city.

—There are things I don't like. I don't like the uniformity of his world, the boring barracks life, although it's forgivable, I guess, in a monk; and I don't like the endless adoration of science, and I don't like the passion for Plato, and I don't like the Caesar Complex—or Mussolini—the elevation of the state, and all that control, in industry, education and art, control of the mind, even of the heart—

BOY: Wait! Wait! What do you mean “the heart”? The state tells you who to fuck? Are you serious?

GUZMAN: Well, it's an old idea. It comes from Plato, who probably picked it up from the Greek farmers, simply applying their breeding techniques to people, trying to get the characteristics they liked, really trying to control the future. In Plato, as in Campanella, the state restricts breeding and the magistrates decide who will mate, improvement of the race and strengthening of the state the only concern. Exchanging flowers and little notes—even a song at the window—is permitted, but nothing more. Can you believe it? Can you see the state doing this?

BOY: Fuck the state! How can it tell you who to fuck? I hate the fucking state! The state is putrid! The state is an animal! What is this “state”? I have seen those slimy fat policemen grabbing ass and I have seen them stealing meat—

GUZMAN: Wait! I agree with you. But it's complicated. The problem now is worse than you think. Now the biologists

don't only tell you who to love or when to love,
they freeze the sperm of college professors
and talk about slaughtering and sterilization,
and they write about gene transformation
and use engineering to produce intelligence,
growing neural tissues in hallways, increasing
the size of the brain, making super-dogs.

BOY: Fuck the biologists! Let them leave my heart
alone! Damn them! They are just dictators
without moustaches. Give them braided hats
and they will steal pigs and piss in the square.

GUZMAN: Yes, they use their mystery to protect
themselves.

They get money from the Rockefellers
and use it to torture poor people and animals,
all in the name of love, or science.
If they were in South America they would steal
land from the Indians and spread diseases.
In North America they go on lecture tours
and live in Greece with their wives and children
and go swimming and eat fish.

BOY: I hate government! I hate laws!
I hate policemen! I can't stand them
looking at you as if they knew
all your secrets. As if they knew
what you already had in your pockets.

GUZMAN: No one hates them more than I do,
or understands their tricks. They are perverts
turning love into torture,
turning relief into robbery.

BOY: How do you start understanding them?
How is it that in the whole history of the world

there have never been two months of kindness?
How is it that they always know less than their victims?

GUZMAN: I hate betrayal most. It is like murder. Always shocking, always beyond belief, always sickening to remember.

BOY: And lying—or is it the same? Already I know that lying is their greatest weapon. It gives them pleasure. They are weasels that kill for pleasure. Already I know that.

GUZMAN: You should read the Marquis de Sade. He saw through everything. He got revenge, that dreamer. For him, the state was the greatest enemy of pleasure and freedom. Thirty-four years he lived in jails, flirting a little with the revolution, but hating one regime after another. I'd like to see him walking beside the police on Forty-second Street, buying things in the book stores, looking up at the burning lights, hunting for his name in that most hideous of paradises. And Fourier, ah Fourier, a hundred years after his death his little scribbled notebooks and scattered manuscripts still show him to be one of the true madmen of love and one of the great enemies of repression. He believed in the passions and followed them everywhere. He believed in total fulfillment and organized systems based on the gratifications. He invented the Phalanstery—a kind of commune where all the passions combined in new kinds of bliss. Both Brook Farm and the Kibbutzim are echoes of Fourier. If I had time I'd show you the connections

between him and Saint-Simon,
one realistic, one sentimental,
and I'd show you why Marx hated them both.
It's mad, but no madder
than the compulsive equality of Babeuf,
or Mars seething with happy lovers,
or the Jewish paradise,
or millionaires playing lutes . . .

BOY: But what do you believe in, Father?
I mean, what should I believe in?
What is there left?

GUZMAN: But we've only begun! I mean there is so much
to think about first. What do you want me to do?
I can't just spell it out as if I were teaching
you the catechism—is that what you want?
—I hate injustice, and I have been betrayed,
and I have scorn for ignorance. I'd start there
and then get into the details, economic
organization, what I'd do about money,
and professions and hierarchy and family.
I certainly believe it is still possible
to make yourself over, but I'll tell you right off
that my problem is confusing paradise with paradise.
I mean it's paradise I *want*, I have that mad
yearning, you know, and I can't imagine talking
about the minimum wage in heaven, or clean air
standards—
so the wings won't get dirty—ha!—I am intrigued
by the visionaries, those leaps
into a new state of awareness,
or transformed man, a brain without a body
living forever in a liquid state,
good old decorporealization,
but my heart is still old-fashioned and I want
people to be happy in a world I recognize.
—If I had to make a choice, if I had to choose,

I'd go with a system that frees men from boredom and painful labor and—most of all—fear. Maybe a child-like system again, maybe giving the ruined cities back a little to the foxes—too bad, I know, when such magnificent new instruments are in our hands.

I guess the truth is that the only world that doesn't wear me out with its banality and stupid glitter—and you know this of course—is the one with no clubs at all, my paradise now, though I know all the reasons why it wouldn't work, and I could sit down with the best of the spiders, spinning my own threads of confusion and cynicism, and I know all about myself, why I am so violent and stubborn, and what I use to protect myself, and keep myself protected, and yes, yes, yes and yes, yes, yes and yes, yes, but I do long for a world . . .

BOY: I'm dying, you know!

GUZMAN: One minute more! I do long for a world where souls can live with other souls, where after 10,000 years souls can manage a little without authority or subordination, without shaming themselves in front of the rats and weasels.—I could talk to you for hours about it—as if I haven't—doing my grunting and leaping, carrying my bomb around, but I have to do something about the sunlight, and I have to understand this hopeless place once and for all, every bit of treachery and madness, and what the monster up north is up to. And I have to see what part of the Spaniard the flat-faced Indian still lives in as I wipe the oil from his mouth

and bring back the dream of pearls and slaves and gold cities.

—Well, this is a start;
a far cry, maybe, from Campanella and his heaven
or de Sade and his.

BOY: I've thought about it a lot and if you ask me there's nothing better than the simple pleasures. Of all the people you've talked about I like Fourier the most. I would like to spend my days working and making love and smoking. I would love to, maybe, work for an hour—on cardboard boxes, I'm good at that—or fixing radios, or sanding down a door, and then sleep, maybe have a milkshake and fall asleep—in the afternoon, I love to sleep in the afternoon—and eat supper with some close friends, and go to see *The Informer*, or *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*: “Badges? We ain't got no stinking badges,” and then lie down with my girl by my side smoking and thinking . . .

GUZMAN: My package! Where's my package?

BOY: I didn't see it. I think it was under your bed.

GUZMAN: I keep it here all the time! Where is it?
You took it again! You're playing games!
Where is it?

BOY: Now don't get excited.
The last time I saw it, I think,
was when you went to get questioned. Maybe the police took it. They came and looked through your trunk

yesterday morning, I think.

GUZMAN: Where is my dress?
Why are you playing games? You stole my dream.
The one with buttons! The one with a rip
in the sleeve! Come on,
I know you took it, you bastard! Why
do you always do this? Where's my dress?
Where is it?

BOY: Wait, now just wait, we'll find it.

III

BOY: I think you're right. I think we have to go back to the simple time before Gomez was president to understand what we are still prisoners of. I want so much to learn about my country. I wish I had the books; I wish I knew how to start and who to trust and where to go for everything. Do you know I never heard of him until yesterday morning, how long he was president, how many people he kept in his jails, what he looked like, how he worked out his cunning and his terror.

GUZMAN: Do me a favor and be the dress again. I want to see how it rises in the wind and falls again on the body. I want to see the folds and half-imagine it shaking in anger, then floating down the hall and turning around for the last time in the noisy elevator.

BOY: How about a conversation between your man and mine. We have to talk about the country. We have to understand what U.S. Steel has done to the mystic mountain, how it stole the Indian's oldest dream, we have to nail down all the facts, right?—All right, the dress! But I'm not going to make a fool of myself, even for you. Here's a broomstick, and that's as far as I go. I hate the dress, always dancing, always smelling like soap. Half the people in Venezuela are living in hunger and you are talking to a dress.

GUZMAN: Why did you leave me?

DRESS (BOY): I didn't *leave* you. Why is it always you over there

dropping tears in your hat and smearing blood
on your cheek, and me over here dabbing
your forehead and wiping your eyes?

GUZMAN: Why is it always you getting it wrong?
Why is it always you with sticky hair
and a little dreamy smile? Why is it you
with a dishrag in your hand, looking for dirt?

DRESS: Oh I love it! This is going to be
one of those days! For some strange reason
I keep thinking of the Milky Way.
Remember? There are 400 billion stars
in the Milky Way. 400 billion stars!
You taught me yourself, remember?
And in the universe there are hundreds of millions
of Milky Ways separated by hundreds of thousands
of light years, each containing thousands of billions
of stars. There are far more stars in the sky
than there are grains of sand on all the beaches
of South and North America, certainly more
than there were on that sweet beach where you once
showed me the bright sky and told me not to grieve
over two dumb lives.

GUZMAN: I love it when you can remember!
Well, why did you leave me?

DRESS: Because you cornered me. Because you didn't
hear anything I said. Because you erased me.

GUZMAN: Why did you lie to me?

DRESS: To save myself. Why did you lie to me?

GUZMAN: Where were you when I tried to call?

DRESS: Taking a walk! Hanging on the bathroom door!

GUZMAN: Why do you answer me like this?

DRESS: Because I'm only a dress! Because you can see through me!

GUZMAN: I can't remember how we lived. I think I have forgotten everything. Do you know how many notebooks I filled up with my sorrows, how many questions I asked you, how many times I wrote the words down, slowly and painfully?

DRESS: There's never a reason. You know there's never a reason.

What could I do with your words? Where could I put them? I memorized the list. I had an answer for every question, but what is that? I died when I saw your sadness and confusion.

GUZMAN: I did it by categories. I did it by Roman numerals. I put a large star beside the major questions and a small star beside the others. I made my appeal to clarity, as if that counted most, and I labored with language to overcome my panic and your stubbornness. Sometimes I was wise and buoyant, as if I were arguing for my life. I tried to generalize my condition as if I could move in to philosophy and save myself from too much pain. Maybe we both wanted freedom, maybe we both had the same ideas, maybe we had to work our way through our own hells.

DRESS: If I could undo the past I'd do it. It was impossible. I was exhausted.

GUZMAN: What good does it do to argue with a dress? What good does it do to stand up like a madman

with your crooked finger pointing to the sky,
making the same points, over and over?

DRESS: Do you think you are the only one with feelings?
I had a life to live—do you know I had to
live my real life on the sly? I had my own
quirks, I was human, though you never
seemed to notice. . .

GUZMAN: Whatever I did it was
for you as well as me. I went away thinking
of you; I came back loving you.

DRESS: I sat there like a stone. Watching and waiting.
I had to stop.

GUZMAN: I know I exhausted you.
I know you couldn't take my strange emotions.
I was transforming us both. I was converting
the two of us. We *had* to find the meaning
of what we were doing. What were we, two red muscles
opening and closing? I wasn't suppressing.
I wasn't evading. It was an act of triumph.
I wanted to liberate myself; I wanted
to liberate you. I wanted to be invaded.
I wanted to see myself in the wilderness,
wearing a wolf's skin, and eating thistles, and howling.
I wanted to see you close to the fire, your mouth
open with fear, your breasts sagging, your knees
bloody from crawling over the stones, the spirit
of the past inside you, all the horrors of love
coming over you, all the senseless history,
like flames on the wall, flashing up for a minute—
the fat exploding—so we could see just once
what it was we wanted, what had hold of us.

DRESS: My God, are we going to do that again?
Do I have to be the moon in its three phases

devouring you with my teeth and my hidden fluids?
Are you going to hide in the closet and moan
in one of your stupid foreign languages
while I put on my nightgown, or are you
going to make me get on my hands and knees
beside the bed so you can walk on top of me
and break my back, or turn me into an altar
so you can kill your pigeons and rabbits over me?
What do you want me to do? Why don't you buy
a simple leather belt and get right to it,
or a black dildo faced with mother-of-pearl?

GUZMAN: I think I loved you for your meanness of spirit,
for your foul mouth and your drunkenness and your greed.
You are a racist and a demagogue.
Anything touching thought, anything touching spirit,
is either boring to you, or silly, or galling.
I'd like to see you with newspaper in your shoes
and rats in your hallway.
I'd like to see you for a minute with your
true face exposed, behind that sweet niceness,
your eyes bulging, your tongue red and gluey.

DRESS: Aha! The *man* is talking. He is angry.
He's going to bite our clit. He's going to
pound our teeth. He's going to make us
memorize a hundreds lines of Goethe.
He can't stand our smell. He doesn't like
the way we clean the house or wash the dishes.
He's going to make us stand in the back
of the bed. He's afraid that we will eat him
up or drive him mad—maybe we'll crunch
his bones and suck the marrow, maybe
we'll drink his blood, maybe
we'll wash him in gore and tear the poor thing off.

GUZMAN: You know that doesn't work with me. We've
done that

over and over. What good does it do? If I weren't a priest I'd sit beside you all day long. I'd learn to darn—I swear it—I'd learn the lost art of darning; I'd wear a pair of steel spectacles on the end of my nose and study the thin bridges going back and forth and the tiny loops my hand makes over and under, like a slow machine.

DRESS: Why are you doing this? Why are you being a priest?

You know you're no more a priest than I'm a nun. Where did you get the crazy idea? If you want to work with the poor why don't you start in the Bronx? You're always talking about the Bronx! And where did you get the coat and collar? I love you in it. You really are a priest—but I'm not going to be Heloise. I'm not going to sit there like a grateful dog with my tongue out and my eyes shining while you instruct me. I could teach *you*, you know, if you would only listen. *You* were the one who wanted the pain. I know you loved it. Anyhow you would make a terrible Abelard. You couldn't bear to be without your women, and I don't think you'd go for the purity. Your voice would crack. And you'd get bored.

GUZMAN: I love the idea, though. We could be like sisters.

We could write each other letters and talk about our new lovers with each other. We could change places. Yourself; myself. We could be ghosts.

DRESS: We could lie hand in hand staring up at the ceiling. We could go to sleep in each other's arms without the slightest provocation. We could even kiss and touch.

And make breakfast together. Black bread and cheese.

GUZMAN: Cleopatra always ate her lovers for breakfast. She'd leave little notes on the pillow. "You have been eaten, my poor spider, thanks for the stab, it was divine. I guess I won't see you again. Farewell." I'm on the side of the spider. Should I be Goethe or Keats? Or Franklin Roosevelt? Shall I carry a cane? Where shall I put my revolver?

DRESS: You know, I can't imagine the world without you. Be Byron first! And then Woodrow Wilson.

GUZMAN: Do you remember when our shadows kissed beside the bed? Do you remember the birds on the white wall, how tragic they looked falling through space?

DRESS: Oh, don't do this to me!
I don't want to think about it now!
I don't want to think about the shadows!

GUZMAN: O.K. Enough! Enough! You're breaking my heart.

BOY: There's nothing sadder than talking to the dress.

GUZMAN: Nothing sadder, I know. . . I think it's time for the horror show.

BOY: O.K. This time don't spit in my face and don't pretend you're in church. You have to learn to talk into the mike. No drama. You talk in your own voice.

AMBASSADOR (GUZMAN): Let me warm up: If you want to dream again about gold nuggets the size of tennis balls;

if you want to imagine a square half a mile wide
with glass colonnades and giant statues
of ivory, inlaid with pearl, if you want to see
water cascading through a silver forest
and feel the wind in your hair, then here is Gomez.
He will give you back your great vision
of El Dorado, he will perfume the air for you,
and while you sleep at night he will clean the streets
of all the lazy whores and vagrants and all the
peddlars and pimps, and students, and greasy Indians.

GOMEZ (BOY): Wait! I'll go first: Good evening, this is
your president.

I'm sitting here with the American ambassador,
a dear friend of mine, a good neighbor
and a perfect gentleman, a lover of music
and Greek philosophy. We have been talking
together about the Spanish delusion, the city
buried inside the jungle, the lost El Dorado.
It is a Spanish delusion because the Spaniards
died by the thousands searching for a shadow.
There was no El Dorado, there was only
a tribe of Indians who annointed their king
with fragrant gum and sprayed him with powdered gold
before they dipped him in their sacred lake,
either to fool or appease their rich god.
This was how it started but gold was already
singing in the blood and this quaint king
became a glittering emperor and this village
became a city of gold beyond the mountains.
Juan Martín, that insane liar,
talked about walking for two full days
through the vast city before he reached the palace
and the throne of the king.
Dozens like him scoured the continent,
looking for emeralds and pearls
among the fleas and vampire bats and mosquitoes,
always deceiving themselves more than others.

The city doesn't exist, the city
never existed except as a new symbol
for the buried dream, but that is good enough.
For me, it is real.

—In my own words I would say that this place
lies in your heart and you must search for it there
as you would search for a dollar in the road,
as you would get on your hands and knees and hunt
in the horseshit and the dust and the broken glass.

AMBASSADOR: I agree that El Dorado is real,
even if it doesn't exist. Did crazy Raleigh
go into the jungle for nothing? Did his poor men
fight the water until their hands were raw
and their clothes rotting and their souls exhausted
for nothing? Did mad dog Gonzalo Pizarro
and his starving soldiers turn cannibal as they clawed
their way back to Peru for nothing? Did poor
old Governor Berrio throw away his fortune
and go through Hell a second time for nothing?
And Quesada and Federmann and von Hutten and
Belalcázar—did all
those conquerers turn hollow-eyed for nothing?

GOMEZ: Now my question for the ambassador is:
tell me, what do you do in North America
when people spit on the dream? What do you do
to remind them of their sadness and their loss?

AMBASSADOR: In North America we try to be pleasant.
It's sad but our jails are too much like hotels.
I don't want to say it because it sounds so stingy—
there they are, locked up—but we have put
their benefactors in charge of their fate. They sit there,
all those priests and rabbis, weeping
in the hallways, lecturing the police.

GOMEZ: You have to be tough! I invented the hook,

though others have taken the credit. I hang up women
by the breast; I hang up men by the thorax.
And I invented the wire! I wrap it around
the balls! I call it the machinata. It is mine!

AMBASSADOR: You paid your foreign debts. I'll say that
for you.

You never quarreled with the United States
and you made peace with the English and the Dutch.
You brought prosperity. Power had to come from
somewhere.

You kept seventy-three oil companies at work.
Under you there were no more
coffee and cocoa farms, under you
the country came of age. You are the Giver
of Pity. You are the Hero of Peace and Work.
You are the Restorer. You are the Weaver.

GOMEZ: I like to make them stand for two whole days
facing the wall, with their hands tied behind them
so they have to piss through their clothes;
I like to break their legs, I like to see them
pushing themselves on their stomachs through the sewage.
I like to stuff rags in their mouths
while they scream, and muffle the sound with singing.
I love the Mexican way, I bury them standing
up to their necks in sand and beat their heads
with bricks and shovels until their faces are raw;
and I love the liquid cure, I make them lie
for weeks in water—like frogs—until the flesh rots.
I do the bastinado by tying them down
with their faces in wooden troughs and beat the soles
with razor straps and canes and metal rulers.
Most of all, I love the quiet trembling
after it's over. Twenty years after it's over.
I could say more but I believe in silence.
I just want to mention two things: I have refrained
from talking about the rectum and the genitals,

and I have resisted the use of machinery
to save my people money.

AMBASSADOR: How sad it is that we have strayed from the
dream.

What a world it could have been. How sweet
life was at first, the streams of fresh water,
the sheltered coves, the beaches of soft white sand.

GOMEZ: I created the sulphur works and the salt works.
Why shouldn't my relatives work for me?
I have my own sugar mills and cattle ranches.
I believe in money, what's wrong with that?
I sent men to jail to make them useful.
I kept the currency hard.
I stopped the cattle thieves. I built the roads.
I uprooted every obstacle.
I brought meat to the capital—[BOY breaking through]—I
can't do it!
Dear God! I can't do it. I quit!
It's too horrible! I quit! I quit!

GUZMAN: How could we do this? It's degrading! How
could we do it?

BOY: I guess we had to. I guess we had to do it.
I feel like asking forgiveness. Who do I ask for forgiveness?

GUZMAN: I don't know how we started in the first place.
Gomez is insane! Can you imagine him
actually running a country? Can you see him?

BOY: It's the ambassador I really hate,
with his tennis balls and his golf balls and his medicine ball.
He was down here sucking oil, he was
unloading crates of guns; his hands are raw
from the crowbar pressing into his palms, his eyes
are red from paper and straw, his belly is flat—
I saw it!—from running up and down our beaches.

GUZMAN: I am thinking of what men used to call justice. I am thinking of the Egyptians walking into their temples and the Jews into theirs. I am thinking of the Greeks finally burying the darkness; no more blindness, no more castration and mutilation and stoning; I am thinking of the acts of mercy, the judges finally walking into the courtrooms with smiles on their sweet faces.

BOY: Maybe you should talk to me about the Village, and Central Park, and the iron gates of Columbia University. Tell me about the taxicabs lined up on Madison Avenue, tell me about the windows at Bloomingdale's and those dear Santa Clauses ringing their bells in the snow—for Christ's sake, who are you now? Are you crazy? What are you doing? Put down that stick, you asshole!

COLUMBUS (GUZMAN): Kneel, kneel, in the name of Holy Doctrine!
In the name of Spain! In the name of the Inquisition!
In the name of Europe! In the name of civilization!
In the name of this life! In the name of the life to come!

BOY: Who are you, Gomez? Are you crazy?
Why are you rolling your eyes?

COLUMBUS: I take possession for their most serene, exalted and mighty King and Queen our Sovereigns, rulers of Spain and the islands of the sea, enemies of the Moslems and the Jews and all those who will not confess or convert. I call your attention to their greatness and justice and their charity to all oppressed nations. I challenge anyone either on horseback or foot to deny my rights to take this place by force. Here is my banner, here is my cross and column.

Here is my paper. Here is my pen and ink.

BOY: You son of a bitch! What are you with those vague eyes and that smug poetic face?

Do you think I've never seen the gilded statue in front of the school or the one in the park reaching out for love? Do you think I don't know that your heart is a stone, that your tongue is running red with blood?

COLUMBUS: I come from Heaven!
I am here to save you! I come from the sky!

BOY: You come from Hell! You are from Hell!

COLUMBUS: Listen to me. My city is made of stone.
My king and queen sit under a gold canopy.
Dear child of sweetness, here are tiny bells
and a red cap, and sugar, and pieces of glass.
You'll love Spain; we'll give you a little house.
You'll no longer be in exile, you won't have to
lament your lost land and your banishment.
I'll always be there to lead you, you can even
travel with me if you want to
through the warm sea off Andalusia
and hear the soft hush-hush as the weeds go by.
Spain will love you in your naked sadness.

BOY: Fuck all of Spain, and Europe, and the cross and the
compass!
And all that charity and sweetness!
Fuck this universe shaped like a rotten egg.
And you and your ships, and you and your sons and your
brothers.

COLUMBUS: I bring you more than you could ever dream
of.
One day there will be a school here, and a church.

There is the square and there is the gibbet; there
is the storehouse for the gold—I know you never
solved the problem of storage—there is the palace,
there is the tribute room, there is the great
museum of nature, all your trees and flowers
will be on display; there is the hospital,
we will have raisins and almonds for the sick,
you will go to work to make yourself rich,
we will ride horses, we will find gold,
gold is most excellent, gold constitutes treasure,
gold can bring your soul to Paradise,
I will feed the hungry and clothe the naked.
I will heal the sick and bury the dead.

BOY: If I could I'd kill you with this piece of glass!
I wish *I* had the iron! I wish it was me
landing on the coast of Ireland. I wish
it was me getting my army together
to march on London or Paris
or through those boring plains to Madrid.
Oh, would I burn your churches!

GUZMAN: We're hurting each other! We're hurting each
other!

BOY: Well, don't fuck with me!

GUZMAN: That's the last time.

BOY: You're damn right it's the last time.

GUZMAN: Come on, let's start a fire. It's getting cold.

BOY: The smell of smoke is the smell of misery.

GUZMAN: O.K., O.K., a little fire won't kill us.

BOY: Our eyes are red from fire!

GUZMAN: Without it we would still be living in pain, we would still be following the little light and coming together in tiny bands. Dear Prometheus!

BOY: I know all that! Prometheus stole the energy of heaven. For him it was the end of darkness. For him it was the true beginning. Zeus was a bastard!

GUZMAN: I love to think of fire at night when I am lying on top of my bed. I sometimes see the flames rising through the whole universe, burning away everything corrupt and rotten. I sometimes think of a fox racing like a small torch from field to field, setting the grass and trees on fire, cleaning everything before it. Sometimes I see my life in smoke, with me wandering through the ashes.

BOY: I like to put a sheet of paper over the coals and watch it burn. At first you see a kind of glow and then it suddenly curls up and floats away. I wonder if cave men hibernated before they discovered fire—who are you talking to now, crazy man?

GUZMAN: I was saying goodbye to the dress.

BOY: Throw it in the fire.

GUZMAN: Do you think the gilded man dove into the lake to appease the buried god, or to get his wisdom and power?

BOY: I don't know.
I don't understand these things.

GUZMAN: Maybe he was purging
his race of sin, or sickness. Do you know
it was a giant meteor dropping out of the sky
that made the hole in the first place? Think of that!
The myth of paradise begun by a hot stone
hitting the ground. I wonder if the Indians
believed in it too or if they just
gave the lunatics what they wanted, or gave them
just enough to keep them moving. Golden
Temples lying in the jungle. Maybe
it was an Indian joke.

BOY: I have a question to ask you.
Do you think I'm being too hard on my country?
Do you think there is a chance? After all,
we've changed, haven't we? Haven't we changed?

GUZMAN: I go through that agony all the time. Come on.
The fire's almost out. It's really cold.

BOY: You know, fire is the one element that exists
alone and refuses to allow the cohabitation
of any other element.

GUZMAN: No fucking with fire.

BOY: Clown through a flaming hoop.

GUZMAN: Red star over Bethlehem.

BOY: Light from the sun of the resurrection.

GUZMAN: Watts and Harlem.

BOY: Eternal exile.

GUZMAN: Quixote's voyage for the deliverance of the world.

BOY: Look, the boat's leaving now. I don't think I'll ever get to North America. What would I do there anyhow—line up for my welfare check? Go to college and study data processing or nursing? Turn in my English papers? Find a little girl whose mind's on fire with music and poetry, and end up moving from slum to slum?

GUZMAN: Brooklyn's the place for you! I understand Flatbush is having a comeback. You could go to either Brooklyn College or N.Y.U. With a memory like yours you'll have no problem with college. I'll help you. Look at that star over there, a billion miles from the earth. Campanella is probably washing himself in the flames. Dante is probably explaining the sweetness to Virgil.

BOY: It is a beautiful night. Life is still good. And full of pleasure—and hope—

GUZMAN: No fucking with hope.

BOY: Clown through a flaming hope.

GUZMAN: Hope over Bethlehem.

BOY: Hope from the sun of the resurrection.

GUZMAN: Hope and Harlem.

BOY: No fucking with Harlem!

GUZMAN: No fucking with the stars!

Мотыль сильнее рисунка, но рисунок
 движущей мотыль. Тем сейчас же тронуть
 или свести мотыль в существующих рисунке
 и угаде, не говоря уже, что рисунок
 не проба, но мотыль мотыль и угаде



всего-таки что сейчас ирисит
 что вот так не всматриваясь в рисунке
 но то что мотыль мотыль мотыль



миссия



но то что сейчас мотыль мотыль
 мотыль мотыль мотыль мотыль

Сонет

Рассказ о том, что (миссия, миссия)



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Огонь мотыль - миссия мотыль
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A Joseph Brodsky manuscript page: Sonnet No. 14 from the cycle "Twenty Sonnets to Mary Queen of Scots" which was included in the Russian version of A Part of Speech.



Natalya Scharimova

The Art of Poetry XXVIII Joseph Brodsky

Joseph Brodsky was interviewed in his Greenwich Village apartment in December, 1979. He was unshaven and looked harried. He was in the midst of correcting the galley proofs for his book—A Part of Speech—and he said that he had already missed every conceivable deadline. The floor of his living room was cluttered with papers. It was offered to do the interview at a more convenient time, but Brodsky would not hear of it.

The walls and free surfaces of his apartment were almost entirely obscured by books, post cards, and photographs. There were a number of pictures of a younger Brodsky, with Auden and Spender, with Octavio Paz, with various friends.

Over the fireplace were two framed photographs, one of Akhmatova, another of Brodsky with his son, who remains in Russia.

Brodsky has been in the U.S. since 1972. He had been on trial in 1964 for "parasitism" and served 20 months of a 5-year hard labor sentence in the Arkhangelsk region. In 1972 the authorities "asked" him to leave. His Selected Poems was published in 1973, soon after his arrival in Ann Arbor. At the time of the interview he divided his teaching duties between Ann Arbor and New York. Since the time of the interview Mr. Brodsky has been vocal in his opposition to the military crackdown in Poland.

Brodsky made two cups of strong instant coffee. He sat in a chair stationed beside the fireplace and kept the same basic pose for three hours—head tilted, legs crossed, the fingers of his right hand either holding a cigarette or resting on his chest. The fireplace was littered with cigarette butts. Whenever he was tired of smoking he would fling his cigarette in that direction.

His answer to the first question did not please him. Several times he said: "Let's start again." But about five minutes into the interview he seemed to have forgotten that there was a tape recorder, or for that matter, an interviewer. He picked up speed and enthusiasm.

Brodsky's voice, which Nadezhda Mandelstam once described as a "remarkable instrument" is nasal and very resonant. His English is still heavily influenced by the mother tongue—the speech is liberally salted with "ya's."

During a break Brodsky asked what kind of beer the interviewer would like and set out for the corner store. As he was returning through the back courtyard one of his neighbors called out: "How are you, Joseph? You look like you're losing weight." "I don't know," answered Brodsky's voice. "Certainly I'm losing my hair." A moment later he added: "And my mind."

When the interview was finished Brodsky looked relaxed, not at all the same man who had opened the door four hours before. He seemed reluctant to stop talking. But then the

papers on the floor began to claim his attention. "I'm awfully glad we did this," he said. He saw the interviewer out the door with his favorite exclamation: "Kisses!"

INTERVIEWER

I wanted to start with a quotation from Nadezhda Mandelstam's book, *Hope Abandoned*. She says of you, "He is . . . a remarkable young man who will come to a bad end, I fear."

BRODSKY

In a way I *have* come to a bad end. In terms of Russian literature—in terms of being published in Russia. However, I think she had in mind something of a worse denomination—namely, physical harm. Still, for a writer not to be published in his mother tongue is as bad as a bad end.

INTERVIEWER

Did Akhmatova have any predictions?

BRODSKY

Perhaps she did, but they were nicer, I presume, and therefore I don't remember them. Because you only remember bad things—you pay attention to them because they have more to do with you than your work. On the other hand, good things are originated by a kind of divine intervention. And there's no point in worrying about divine intervention because it's either going to happen or it's not. Those things are out of your control. What's under your control is the possibility of the bad.

INTERVIEWER

To what extent are you using divine intervention as a kind of psychic metaphor?

BRODSKY

Actually to a large extent. What I mean actually is the intervention of language upon you or into you. That famous line of Auden's about Yeats: "Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry—"

What “hurts” you into poetry or literature is language, your sense of language. Not your private philosophy or your politics, nor even the creative urge, or youth.

INTERVIEWER

So, if you’re making a cosmology you’re putting language at the apex?

BRODSKY

Well, it’s no small thing—it’s pretty grand. When they say “the poet hears the voice of the Muse,” it’s nonsense if the nature of the Muse is unspecified. But if you take a closer look, the voice of the Muse is the voice of the language. It’s a lot more mundane than the way I’m putting it. Basically, it’s one’s reaction to what one hears, what one reads.

INTERVIEWER

Your use of that language—it seems to me—is to relate a vision of history running down, coming to a dead end.

BRODSKY

That might be. Basically, it’s hard for me to assess myself, a hardship not only prompted by the immodesty of the enterprise, but because one is not capable of assessing himself, let alone his work. However, if I were to summarize, my main interest is the nature of time. That’s what interests me most of all. What time can do to a man. That’s one of the closest insights into the nature of time that we’re allowed to have.

INTERVIEWER

In your piece on St. Petersburg you speak of water as “collected time.”

BRODSKY

Ya, it’s another form of time. . . it was kind of nice, that piece, except that I never got proofs to read and quite a lot of mistakes crept in, misspellings and all those things. It matters to me. Not because I’m a perfectionist, but because of my love

affair with the English language.

INTERVIEWER

How do you think you fare as your own translator? Do you translate or rewrite?

BRODSKY

No, I certainly don't rewrite. I may redo certain translations, which causes a lot of bad blood with translators, because I try to restore in translation even those things which I regard as weaknesses. It's a maddening thing in itself to look at an old poem of yours. To translate it is even more maddening. So, before doing that you have to cool off a great deal, and when you start you are looking upon your work as the soul looks from its abode upon the abandoned body. The only thing the soul perceives is the slow smoking of decay.

So, you don't really have any attachment to it. When you're translating, you try to preserve the sheen, the paleness of those leaves. And you accept how some of them look ugly, but then perhaps when you were doing the original that was because of some kind of strategy. Weaknesses have a certain function in a poem . . . some strategy in order to pave the reader's way to the impact of this or that line.

INTERVIEWER

Do you get very sensitive about the way someone renders you into English?

BRODSKY

My main argument with translators is that I care for accuracy and they're very often inaccurate—which is perfectly understandable. It's awfully hard to get these people to render the accuracy as you would want them to. So rather than brooding about it, I thought perhaps I would try to do it myself.

Besides, I have the poem in the original, that's enough. I've done it and for better or worse it stays there. My Russian laurels—or lack of them—satisfy me enough. I'm not after a good seat on the American Parnassus. The thing that bothers

me about many of those translations is that they are not very good English. It may have to do with the fact that my affair with the English language is fairly fresh, fairly new, and therefore perhaps I'm subject to some extra sensitivity. So what bothers me is not so much that the line of mine is bad—what bothers me is the bad line in English.

Some translators espouse certain poetics of their own. In many cases their understanding of modernism is extremely simple. Their idea, if I reduce it to the basics, is “staying loose.” I, for one, would rather sound trite than slack or loose. I would prefer to sound like a cliché . . . an ordered cliché, rather than a clever slackness.

INTERVIEWER

You've been translated by some impeccable craftsmen—

BRODSKY

I was quite lucky on several occasions. I was translated by both Richard Wilbur and Anthony Hecht—

INTERVIEWER

Well, I was at a reading recently where Wilbur was describing to the audience—quite tartly, I thought—how you and Derek Walcott were flying in a plane over Iowa, re-correcting his translation of one of your poems—which did not make him happy . . .

BRODSKY

True. The poem only profited out of that. I respect him enormously. Having asked him to do certain passages three, four, or more times, I merely felt that I had no human right to bother him with that one more time. I just didn't have the guts. Even that uncorrected version was excellent. It's more or less the same thing when I said no to Wystan Auden when he volunteered to translate some poems. I thought, “Who the hell am I to be translated by Wystan?”

INTERVIEWER

That's an interesting reversal—the poet feeling inadequate

to his translator.

BRODSKY

Ya, well, that's the point. I had the same sentiment with respect to Dick Wilbur.

INTERVIEWER

When did you begin to write?

BRODSKY

I started to write when I was eighteen or nineteen. However, until I was about twenty-three, I didn't take it that seriously. Sometimes people say, "the best things you have written were when you were nineteen." But I don't think I'm a Rimbaud.

INTERVIEWER

What was your poetic horizon then? Did you know of Frost, or Lowell?

BRODSKY

No. But eventually, I got to all of them, first in translation, then in the original. My first acquaintance with Robert Frost was when I was twenty-two. I got some of his translations, not in a book, again, from some friends of mine—well, this is the way you get things—and I was absolutely astonished at the sensibility, that kind of restraint, that hidden, controlled terror. I couldn't believe what I'd read. I thought I ought to look into the matter closely, ought to check whether the translator was really translating, or whether we had on our hands a kind of genius in Russian. And so I did, and it was all there, as much as I could detect it. And with Frost it all started.

INTERVIEWER

What were you getting in school up until then—Goethe, Schiller?

BRODSKY

We got the whole thing. The English poets would be Byron

and Longfellow, 19th Century-oriented. Classics, so to speak. You wouldn't hear anything about Emily Dickinson, or Gerard Manley Hopkins or anyone else. They give you two or three foreign figures and that's about it.

INTERVIEWER

Did you even know the name "Eliot"?

BRODSKY

We all knew the name Eliot. (*laughs*) For any Eastern European, Eliot is a kind of Anglo-Saxon brand name.

INTERVIEWER

Like Levis?

BRODSKY

Ya, like Levis. We all knew there was a poet Eliot, but it was very hard to get any stuff of his. The first attempt to translate him was made in 1936, 1937, in an anthology of English poetry; the translation was quite hapless. But since we knew his reputation we read more into the lines than there ever was—at least in Russian. So . . . immediately after the accomplishment the translators got executed or imprisoned, of course, and the book was out of circulation.

However, I managed to make my way through it gradually, picking up English by arming myself with a dictionary. I went through it line by line because basically at the age of twenty, twenty-three, I knew more or less all of the Russian poetry and had to look somewhere else. Not because Russian poetry ceased to satisfy me, but once you've read the texts you know them . . .

INTERVIEWER

Then you were translating too?

BRODSKY

That was the way of making a living. I was translating all kinds of nonsense. I was translating Poles, Czechs, brother

Slavs, but then I ventured across the borders; I began to translate Spanish poetry. I was not doing it alone. In Russia there is a huge translating industry, and lots of things weren't yet translated. In introductions or critical essays you would encounter the name of an obscure poet who had not been translated and you would begin to hunt for him

Then I began to translate English poetry, Donne especially. When I was sent to that internal exile in the north, a friend of mine sent me two or three anthologies of American poetry . . . Oscar Williams, with the pictures, which would fire my imagination. With a foreign culture, a foreign realm, that you think you are never going to see, your love affair is a lot more intense.

So I was doing those things, reading, translating, approximating rather than translating . . . until finally I came here to join the original (*laughs*) . . . came *too* close to the original.

INTERVIEWER

Have you lost any of the admirations you had? Do you still feel the same way about Donne, Frost?

BRODSKY

About Donne and Frost I feel the same way. I feel slightly less about Eliot, much less about e. e. cummings. . . .

INTERVIEWER

There was a point, then, when cummings was a very impressive figure?

BRODSKY

Ya, because modernism is very high, the avant-garde thing, trickery and all that. And I used to think about it as a most desirable goal to achieve.

I lost a lot of idols, say, Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters. However, some things got reinforced, like Marvell, Donne . . . I'm naming just a few but it deserves a much more thorough conversation . . . and Edward Arlington Robinson, for instance. Not to speak of Thomas Hardy.

INTERVIEWER

When did you first run into an Auden poem?

BRODSKY

In 1965. I was in that village, in that internal exile I had been sent to. I'd written several poems, a couple of which I sent to the man who did the translations of Frost that had impressed me so much—I regard his opinion as the highest judgement, even though there is very little communication—and he told me, "This poem of yours"—he was talking about "Two Hours in the Empty Tank"—"really resembles Auden in its sense of humor." I said "ya?" (*laughs*) The next thing, I was trying to get hold of Auden. And then I did and I began to read.

INTERVIEWER

What part of Auden's work did you first encounter?

BRODSKY

I don't really remember—certainly "In Memory of Yeats." In the village I came across that poem . . . I kind of liked it, especially the third part, ya? That "earth receive an honored guest" kind of ballad-cum-Salvation Army hymn. And short meter. I showed it to a friend of mine and he said, "Is it possible that they write better than ourselves?" I said, "Looks like."

The next thing, I decided to write a poem, largely aped from Auden's structure in "Memory of Yeats." However, I didn't look into Auden any closer at that point. And then I came to Moscow and showed that friend of mine, the translator, these poems. Once more, he said, "This resembles Auden." So I went out and found Auden's poems and began to read him more thoroughly.

What interests me is his symptomatic technique of description. He never gives you the real . . . ulcer . . . he talks about its symptoms, ya? He keeps his eye all the time on civilization, on the human condition. But he doesn't give you the direct description of it, he gives you the oblique way. And then when you read a line like "The mercury was sunk in the mouth of the dying day—" well, things begin to change. (*laughs*)

INTERVIEWER

What about your younger years? How did you first come to think about writing poetry?

BRODSKY

At the ages of fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, I didn't write much, not at all, actually. I was drifting from job to job, working. At sixteen I did a lot of traveling. I was working with a geological expedition. And those years were when Russians were extremely interested in finding uranium. So, every geological team was given some sort of Geiger device. I walked a lot. The whole thing was done on foot. So you'd cover about thirty kilometers daily through pretty thick swamps.

INTERVIEWER

Which part of Russia?

BRODSKY

Well, all parts, actually. I spent quite a lot of time in Irkutsk, north of the Amur River on the border of China. Once during a flood I even went to China. It's not that I wanted to, but the raft with all our things on it drifted to the right bank of the Amur River. So I found myself in China briefly. And then I was in Central Asia, in deserts, as well as in the mountains—the Tien Shan mountains are pretty tall mountains, the north-west branch of the Hindu Kush. And, also, in the northern part of European Russia, that is, by the White Sea, near Archangelsk. Swamps, dreadful swamps. Not that the swamps themselves were dreadful, but the mosquitoes! So, I've done that. Also, in Central Asia I was doing a little bit of mountain climbing. I was pretty good at that, I must say. Well, I was young. . . so, I had covered a good deal of territory, with those geological teams and mountain climbing groups. When they first arrested me, in 1959, I think, they tried to threaten me by saying, "We're going to send you far away, where no human foot ever trod." Well, I wasn't terribly impressed because I had already been to many of the regions they were talking about. When they indeed sent me to one of those places, it turned out to be an

area which I knew somewhat well, climactically anyhow. That was near the polar circle, near the same White Sea. So, to me it was some sort of *déjà vu*.

INTERVIEWER

Still, there must be a pretty strong thread leading from the top of the mountain to your meeting Akhmatova.

BRODSKY

In my third or fourth year doing geology I got into writing poems. I started because I saw a book of poems a colleague of mine had. The subject matter was the romantic appeal of all those spaces. At least that's what it seemed to me. I thought that I could do better, so I started writing my own poetry. Which wasn't really terribly good . . . well, some people kind of liked it, but then again everybody who writes finds himself an audience. Oddly enough, ya? All the literati keep at least one imaginary friend—and once you start to write you're hooked. Still, all the same, at that time I had to make my living. So I kept partaking in those travels. It was not so much that they paid well, but in the field you spent much less; therefore your salary was just waiting for you.

I would get this money and return home and live on it for a while. Usually by Christmas time or New Year's the money would run out and I would start to look for a job. A normal operation, I think. And in one of my last travels, which was again to the far eastern part of the country, I got a volume of a poet of Pushkin's circle, though in ways much better than Pushkin—his name is Baratynsky. Reading him forced me to abandon the whole silly traveling thing and to get more seriously into writing. So this is what I started to do. I returned home prematurely and started to write a really quite good poem, the way I remember it.

INTERVIEWER

I read once in a book about Leningrad poets a description of your lair, the lampshade covered with Camel cigarette packs . . .

BRODSKY

That was the place where I lived with my parents. We had one big, huge room in the communal apartment, partitioned by two arches. I simply stuffed those arches with all kinds of bookshelves, furniture, in order to separate myself from my parents. I had my desk, my couch. To a stranger, to a foreigner especially, it looked really like a cave; you had to walk through a wooden wardrobe with no back, like a kind of a gate. I lived there quite a lot. However, I used every bit of money that I made to try to rent or sublet a place for myself, merely because at that age you would rather live someplace other than with your parents, ya? Girls, and so forth.

INTERVIEWER

How was it that you finally came to meet Akhmatova?

BRODSKY

It was in 1961, I think. By that time I'd befriended two or three people who later played a very big role in my life—what later came to be known as “the Petersburg circle.” There were about four of us. One of them is still, I think, the best poet Russia has today. His name is Evgeny Rein; the name comes from the Rhine River. He taught me a lot in terms of poetic know-how. Not that he *taught*. I would read his poems and he would read mine and we would sit around and have high-minded exchanges pretending we knew a lot more than we did; *he* knew something more because he was five years senior to me. At that age it matters considerably. He once said the thing which I would normally say to any poet—that if you really want your poem to work, the usage of adjectives should be minimal; but you should stuff it as much as you can with nouns—even the verbs should suffer. If you cast over a poem a certain magic veil that removes adjectives and verbs, when you remove the veil the paper still should be dark with nouns. To a point I have followed that advice, though not exactly religiously. It did me a lot of good, I must say.

INTERVIEWER

You have a poem which starts “Evgeny mine . . .”

BRODSKY

Ya, it is addressed to him, within that cycle “Mexican Divertimento.” But I’ve written several poems to him, and to a certain extent he remains. . . what’s Pound’s description: “*il miglior fabbro*.” One summer, Rein said: “Would you like to meet Akhmatova?” I said: “Well, why not?” without thinking much. At that time I didn’t care much for Akhmatova. I got a book and read through it, but at that time I was pretty much in my own idiotic world, wrapped up in my own kind of things. So . . . we went there, actually two or three times. I liked her very much. We talked about this and that, and I showed her some of my poems without really caring what she would say.

But I remember one evening returning from her place—it was in the outskirts of Leningrad—in a filled-up train. Suddenly—it was like the seven veils let down—I realized who it was I was dealing with. And after that I saw her quite often.

Then in 1964 I got behind bars and didn’t see her; we exchanged some kind of correspondence. I got released because she was extremely active in trying to get me out. To a certain extent she had blamed herself for my arrest, basically because of the harassment; she was being followed, etcetera, etcetera. Everybody thinks that way about themselves; even I in my turn later on was trying to be kind of cautious with people, because my place was being watched.

INTERVIEWER

Does that phenomenon give you a strange sense of self-importance?

BRODSKY

It really doesn’t. It either scares you or it is a nuisance. You can’t derive any sense of self-importance because you understand a) how idiotic it is, and b) how dreadful it is. The dreadfulness dominates your thoughts. Once, I remember Akhmatova conversing with somebody, some naive woman, or perhaps not so naive, who asked “Anna Andreyevna—how do you notice if you are being followed?” To which she replied:

“My dear, it’s impossible not to notice such a thing.” It’s done to intimidate you. You don’t have to suffer persecution mania. You really *are* being followed.

INTERVIEWER

How long did it take you to get rid of that feeling once you landed in Austria?

BRODSKY

It’s still around, you’re cautious. In your writing, in your exchanges with people, meeting people who are in Russian affairs, Russian literature, etcetera. Because it’s all penetrated, not necessarily by the direct agents of State Security, but by those people who can be used for that.

INTERVIEWER

Were you familiar with Solzhenitzin at that time?

BRODSKY

I don’t think at that time Solzhenitzin was familiar with himself. No, later on. When *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was put out, I read it instantly. I remember, speaking of Akhmatova, talking about *One Day*, and a friend of mine said “I don’t like this book.” Akhmatova said: “What kind of comment is that—‘I like it’ or ‘I don’t like it?’ The point is that the book ought to be read by 200 million of the Russian population.” And that’s it, ya?

I followed Solzhenitzin’s output in the late sixties quite steadily. By 1971, there were about five or six books floating around in manuscript. *Gulag* wasn’t yet published. *August 1914* surfaced at that time. Also his prose poems, which I found absolutely no good. But we like him not for his poetry, ya?

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever met him?

BRODSKY

No. We had one exchange in the mail. . . . I really think

that in him the Soviet rule got its Homer: what he managed to reveal, the way he kind of pulled the world a little bit around, ya?

INTERVIEWER

Insofar as any one person is able to do anything—

BRODSKY

That's about it, ya? But then you have the millions of dead behind him. The force of the individual who is alive grows proportionately—it's not him essentially, but them.

INTERVIEWER

When you were sent to the prison camp in 1965 . . .

BRODSKY

It was an internal exile, not a camp. It was a village, fourteen people, lost, completely lost in bogs up there in the north. With almost no access. First I went through transitory prisons: Crosses.* Then it was Vologda, then Arkhangelsk, and finally I ended up in that village. It was all under guard.

INTERVIEWER

Were you able to maintain an ongoing picture of yourself as someone who uses language?

BRODSKY

That's a funny thing, but I did. Even sitting there between those walls, locked up, then being moved from place to place, I was writing poems. One of them was a very presumptuous poem—precisely about that, being a carrier of the language—extremely presumptuous as I say, but I was in the height of the tragic mood and I could say something like that about myself, to myself even.

INTERVIEWER

Did you have any sense at that time that what had happened at the trial had already put you in the international spotlight?

*Crosses is a prison in Leningrad.

BRODSKY

No, I knew nothing about the international echo of that trial, nothing at all. I realized that I got a great deal of shit on my palate—on my plate—on my palate as well (*laughs*). I had to do my stretch. . . . What's more, that was the time which coincided in an unfortunate way—but then again it was fortunate for me—with my greatest personal trouble, with a girl, etcetera, etcetera. . . . and a kind of triangle overlapped severely with the squares of the solitary confinements, ya? It was a kind of geometry—with vicious circles.

I was more fired up by that personal situation than by what was happening to my body. The displacement from one cell to another, one prison to another, interrogation, all that, I didn't really pay much attention to it.

INTERVIEWER

Were you able to stay in some sort of communication with the literati once you were sent into internal exile?

BRODSKY

I was trying. Mailing things in a kind of roundabout fashion, or directly. Sometimes I even called. I was living in a "village." Fourteen little shacks. Certainly it was obvious that some letters were not read by my eyes alone. But, you know that you are up against it; you know who is the master of your house. It's not you. So therefore you're resigned to try to ridicule the system—but that's about as much as can be done. You feel like a serf bitching about the gentry, which has its own entertaining aspects.

INTERVIEWER

But still a situation in which you must have been under extreme duress—

BRODSKY

No, I wasn't. In the first place I was young. Secondly, the work was agriculture. My old joke is that agriculture is like public transportation in the U.S. It's a sporadic operation,

poorly organized. So therefore you have enough time, ya? Sometimes it was pretty taxing, physically, that is; and also, it was unpleasant. I didn't have the right to leave. I was confined. Perhaps because of some turn in my character, I decided to get the most out of it. I kind of liked it. I associated it with Robert Frost. You think about the environment, the surroundings, what you're doing: you start to play at being almost a gentleman farmer. Other Russian writers, I think, had it much harder than me, much harder.

INTERVIEWER

Did this life give you the rural sense that you have?

BRODSKY

I love it. It gives you more than the rural sense . . . because you get up in the morning in the village, or wherever, and you go to get your daily load, you walk through the field and you know that at the same time most of the nation is doing the same. It gives you some exhilarating sense of being with the rest. If you look from the height of a dove, or a hawk, across the nation you would see it. In that sense it was nice. It gives you a certain insight into the basics of life.

INTERVIEWER

Was there anyone with whom you could talk literature?

BRODSKY

No—but I didn't need it, really. You don't really need it, frankly. Or at least I'm not one of that kind of literary person. Although I love to talk about those things. But once shorn of that opportunity, it's OK. Your democratic traits get set in motion. You talk to the people and try to appreciate what they're saying, etcetera. It pays psychologically.

INTERVIEWER

Did you have many classics at that point?

BRODSKY

Not really. Nothing, in fact. When I needed references I had

to write letters to ask people's help. But I operate on a very basic level with the classics. That is, there's nothing very esoteric. You can find all of it in Bullfinch, ya? I'd read Suetonius and somebody else—Tacitus. But I don't remember, frankly.

INTERVIEWER

At some point the classics must have been quite important. I don't mean specifically the classics, as much as the historical reach. . . .

BRODSKY

Whenever you get in trouble you're automatically forced to regard yourself—unless you are self-indulgent—as a kind of archetypal character. So, who else could I think of being but Ovid? That would be the most natural thing. . . .

Well, that was a wonderful time, I must say. I'd written quite a lot and I think I had written rather well. I remember one breakthrough I made with poetry. I wrote the line "here on the hills, under the empty sky, on the roads leading on into the woods, life steps aside from itself and peers at itself in a state of bewilderment." This is perhaps not much, but to me it was important. . . it's not exactly a new way of looking, but being able to say that unleashes certain other things. You are then invincible.

INTERVIEWER

You had no intimation that you would ever reach the West?

BRODSKY

Oh, no. No Russian has that intimation. You're born to a very confined realm. The rest of the world is just pure geography, an academic discipline, not the reality.

INTERVIEWER

When you left Russia you were going to Israel.

BRODSKY

I had to go to Israel! I was given the walking papers to Israel. But I had no intention to go anywhere. I landed in Vienna and

Carl Proffer from the University of Michigan, from Ardis, met me there. The first thing I saw when I looked out of the plane was his tall figure on the balustrade. We waved to each other. And the first thing he asked me as I walked up was, "Well, Joseph, where would you like to go?"

I said: "Jesus, I haven't the slightest idea." And I really didn't. I knew I was leaving my country for good, but for where, I had no idea whatsoever. One thing which was quite clear was that I didn't want to go to Israel. I didn't know Hebrew though I knew a little English.

Besides, I didn't have much time to think about that. I never even believed that they'd allow me to go. I never believed they would put me on a plane, and when they did I didn't know whether the plane would go east or west.

INTERVIEWER

Was Carl Proffer trying to get you to come to the U.S.?

BRODSKY

When I told him that I had no plans whatsoever, he asked, "Well, how would you like to come to the University of Michigan?" Other proposals came from London and from the Sorbonne, I believe. But I decided, "It's a big change, let's make it really big." At that time they had expelled about 150 spies from England and I thought, "That's not all of them, ya?" (*laughs*) I didn't want to be hounded by what was left of the Soviet Security Service in England. So I came to the States.

INTERVIEWER

Was Auden actually in Vienna at the time?

BRODSKY

Auden wasn't in Vienna, but I knew that he was in Austria. He usually spent his summertimes in Kirchstetten. I had a gift for him. All I took out of Russia was my typewriter, which they unscrewed bolt by bolt at the airport—that was their way of saying goodbye—a small Modern Library volume of Donne's poems, and a bottle of vodka, which I thought that if I got to

Austria I'd give to Auden. If I didn't get to Austria I'd drink it myself. I also had a second bottle from a friend, a Lithuanian poet, Tomas Veñclova—a remarkable poet, I think—who gave me a bottle of Lithuanian booze. He said, "Give this thing to Wystan if you see him." So, I had two bottles, that typewriter, and Donne, along with a change of clothes, that is, underwear, and that was it.

On the third or fourth day in Vienna I said to Carl, "Wystan Auden may be in Austria—why don't we try to find him?" Since we had nothing to do except go to the opera and restaurants, we hired an Avis car, a VW, got a map of Austria, and went to look for him. The trouble was there are three Kirchstettens. We went through all of them, I think—miles and miles between them—and finally we discovered the Auden-Strasse, and found him there.

He began to take immense care of me immediately. All of a sudden the telegrams in my name began to arrive in care of Auden, ya? He was trying to kind of set me up. He told me about whom to meet here and there, etcetera. He called Charles Osborne in London and got me invited to the Poetry International, 1972. I stayed two weeks in London, with Wystan at Stephen Spender's place.

In general, because in those eight years I was as well read in English poetry as in Russian, I knew the scene rather well. Except that, for instance, I didn't know that Wystan was gay. It somehow escaped me. Not that I care much about that. However, I was emerging from Russia and Russia being quite a Victorian country, that could have tinged my attitude toward Wystan. But I don't think it did.

I stayed two weeks in London, and then I flew to the States.

INTERVIEWER

Your connections in the world of poetry have proliferated. You're friends with Hecht, Wilbur, Walcott—

BRODSKY

I met Derek [Walcott] at Lowell's funeral. Lowell had told me about Derek and showed me some poems which impressed

me a great deal. I read them and I thought, "Well, another good poet." Then his editor gave me that collection *Another Life*. That blew my mind completely. I realized that we have a giant on our hands. He is the figure in English poetry comparable to, well, should I say Milton? (*laughs*) Well, more accurately, I'd put him somewhere between Marlowe and Milton, especially because of his tendency to write verse plays, and his vigor. He's astonishing. The critics want to make him a regional poet from the West Indies, and it's a crime. Because he's the grandest thing around.

INTERVIEWER

How about Russian writers?

BRODSKY

I don't know really quite whom I react to most. I remember the great impact Mandelstam's poetry had on me when I was nineteen or twenty. He was unpublished. He's still largely unpublished and unheeded—in criticism and even in private conversations, except for the friends, except for my circle, so to speak. General knowledge of him is extremely limited, if any. I remember the impact of his poetry on me. It's still there. As I read it I'm sometimes flabbergasted. Another poet who really changed not only my idea of poetry, but also my perception of the world—which is what it's all about, ya?—is Tsvetayeva. I personally feel closer to Tsvetayeva—to her poetics, to her techniques, which I was never capable of. This is an extremely immodest thing to say, but, I always thought, "Can I do the Mandelstam thing?" I thought on several occasions that I succeeded at a kind of pastiche.

But Tsvetayeva. I don't think I ever managed to approximate her voice. She was the only poet—and if you're a professional that's what's going on in your mind—with whom I decided not to compete.

INTERVIEWER

What was the distinctive element that attracted you but also

frustrated you?

BRODSKY

Well, it never frustrated me. She's a woman in the first place. But hers is the most tragic voice of all Russian poetry. It's impossible to say she's the greatest because other people create comparisons—Cavafy, Auden—but I personally feel tremendously attracted to her.

It is a very simple thing. Hers is extremely tragic poetry, not only in subject matter—this is not big news, especially in the Russian realm—but in her language, her prosody. Her voice, her poetry, gives you almost the idea or sense that the tragedy is within the language itself. The reason I decided—it was almost a conscious decision not to compete with her—well, for one thing, I knew I would fail. After all, I'm a different person, a man what's more, and it's almost unseemly for a man to speak at the highest pitch of his voice, by which I don't mean she was just a kind of romantic, raving. . . . she was a very dark poet.

INTERVIEWER

She can hold more without breaking?

BRODSKY

Ya. Akhmatova used to say about her: "Marina starts her poem on the upper *do*, that edge of the octave." Well, it's awfully hard to sustain a poem on the highest possible pitch. She's capable of that. A human being has a very limited capacity for discomfort or tragedy. Limited, technically speaking, like a cow that can't produce more than two gallons of milk. You can't squeeze more tragedy out of a man. So, in that respect, her reading of the human drama, her inconsolable voice, her poetic technique, are absolutely astonishing. I think nobody wrote better, in Russian, anyway. The tone with which she was speaking, that kind of tragic vibrato, that tremolo.

INTERVIEWER

Did you have to come to her gradually or did you discover her overnight?

BRODSKY

No, it was from the very threshold. I was given her poems by a friend of mine. That was it.

INTERVIEWER

In your own poems the speaking voice is so terribly solitary, without benefit of a single human interaction.

BRODSKY

Ya, that's what it is. Akhmatova said this about the first batch of poems I brought her in 1962. That's exactly what she said, verbatim. I presume that's the characteristic of it.

INTERVIEWER

As poems emerge are you conscious of the extent to which—for someone looking at them from the outside—they have a discernible line of development and movement?

BRODSKY

No—the only thing I'm conscious of is that I'm trying to make them different from the previous stuff I've written. Because one reacts not only to what he's read, but what he wrote as well, ya? So every preceding thing is the point of departure. There should be a small surprise that there is some kind of detectable linear development.

INTERVIEWER

You seem to write about places that don't appear to be the places where you've spent most of your time. Has there been anything on New York, or Venice?

BRODSKY

I don't think I've written anything about New York. You can't do much about New York. Whereas Venice—I've done quite a lot. But places like New England or Mexico, or England, old England—basically when you find yourself in a strange place, and the stranger the place it is, to a certain extent, the better—it somehow sharpens your notion of your individual-

ity, say a place like Brighton (*laughs*) or York in England. You see yourself better against a strange background. It's to be living outside your own context, like being in exile. One of the advantages is that you shed lots of illusions. Not illusions about the world, but illusions about yourself. You kind of winnow yourself. I never had as clear a notion of what I am than I acquired when I came to the States—the solitary situation. I like the idea of isolation. I like the reality of it. You realize what you are . . . not that the knowledge is inevitably rewarding. Nietzsche put it in so many words, "A man who's left by himself is left with his own pig."

INTERVIEWER

I'll pay you the compliment of saying my immediate sensation of any place you've described in a poem is to never want to go there.

BRODSKY

Terrific! (*laughs*) If you put it in writing I'll never be hired for an advertising job.

INTERVIEWER

Is it deliberate that you've waited so long between books?

BRODSKY

Not really. I'm not very professional as a writer. I'm not really interested in book after book. There's something ignoble about it, ya?

INTERVIEWER

Does your family in the U.S.S.R. have any sense of what you're doing?

BRODSKY

They have the basic idea, that I'm teaching and that I'm, if not financially, somehow psychologically, well off. They appreciate that I'm a poet. They didn't like it at the very beginning. For a good fifteen years they hated every bit of it, ya?

(*laughs*)—but then why shouldn't they have? I don't think I'm so excited about it myself. Akhmatova told me that when her father learned that she was about to publish a book, he said, well, "Do please one thing. Please take care to not malign my name. If you're going to be in this business, please assume a pen name."

Personally, I'd much prefer to fly small planes, to be a bush pilot somewhere in Africa, than do this.

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel about writing prose?

BRODSKY

I love it, in English. To me it's a challenge.

INTERVIEWER

Is it sweat?

BRODSKY

I don't regard it as sweat. It's certainly labor. Yet it's almost a labor of love. If asked to write prose in Russian I wouldn't be so keen. But in English it's a tremendous satisfaction. As I write I think about Auden, what he would say—would he find it rubbish, or kind of entertaining?

INTERVIEWER

Is he your invisible reader?

BRODSKY

Auden and Orwell.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever tried writing fiction in any form?

BRODSKY

No. Well, when I was young, I tried to write a novel. I wrote what I considered one of the breakthroughs in modern Russian writing. . . I'm awfully glad I never saw it again.

INTERVIEWER

Does anything shock or surprise you? How do you face the world when you get up—with what idea in mind? “Here we go again,” or what?

BRODSKY

It certainly doesn’t surprise me. I think the world is capable of only one thing basically—proliferating its evils. That’s what time seems to be for.

INTERVIEWER

You don’t have a corresponding idea that at some point people will advance a quantum leap in consciousness?

BRODSKY

A quantum leap in consciousness is something I rule out.

INTERVIEWER

Just deterioration—is that the picture?

BRODSKY

Well, dilapidation rather than deterioration. Well, not exactly dilapidation. If we look at things in a linear fashion, it certainly doesn’t look any good, ya? The only thing that surprises me is the frequency, under the present circumstances, of instances of human decency, of sophistication, if you will. Because basically the situation—on the whole—is extremely uncongenial for being decent or right.

INTERVIEWER

Are you, finally, a thoroughly Godless man? It seems contradictory. In some of your poetry I sense an opening.

BRODSKY

I don’t believe in the infinite ability of the reason, or the rational. I believe in it only insofar as it takes me to the irrational—and this is what I need it for, to take me as far as I can get toward the irrational. There it abandons you. For a little

while it creates a state of panic. But this is where the revelations are dwelling—not that you may fish them out. But at least I have been given two or three revelations, or at least they have landed on the edge of reason and left their mark.

This all has very little to do with any ordered religious enterprise. On the whole, I'd rather not resort to any formal religious rite or service. If I have any notion of a supreme being I invest it with absolutely arbitrary will. I'm a little bit opposed to that kind of grocery store psychology which underlies Christianity. You do this and you'll get that, ya? Or even better still: that God has infinite mercy. Well, it's basically anthropomorphism. I would go for the Old Testament God who punishes you—

INTERVIEWER

Irrationally—

BRODSKY

No, arbitrarily. Even more I would go for the Zoroastrian version of deity, which is perhaps the cruellest possible. I kind of like it better when we are dealing with arbitrariness. In that respect I think I'm more of a Jew than any Jew in Israel. Merely because I believe, if I believe in anything, in the arbitrary God.

INTERVIEWER

I suspect you've probably meditated a great deal about Eliot and Auden, the way they made these. . .

BRODSKY

Flings. . .

INTERVIEWER

Well, flings or final decisions.

BRODSKY

Yes, I certainly did. I must say I stand by Auden's more readily than Eliot's. Although it would take somebody much smarter than I am to explain the distinction between the two.

INTERVIEWER

From all the pictures you get, though, Eliot in his last days was a wonderfully happy man, whereas Auden . . .

BRODSKY

Certainly he wasn't. I don't know. It denotes a lot of things. Basically, to arrange your life in such a way that you arrive at a happy conclusion is—well, perhaps I'm too romantic, or too young to respect this kind of thing; or take it seriously. Again, I wasn't fortunate enough to have had the structure laid out for me in childhood, as was the case with the both of them. So I've been doing the whole thing essentially on my own. For instance, I read the Bible for the first time when I was twenty-three. It leaves me somewhat shepherdless, you see. I wouldn't really know what to return to. I don't have any notion of paradise. I don't have one that I derived from childhood which, first of all, is the happiest time, and is also the first time you hear about paradise. I went through the severe, antireligious schooling in Russia which doesn't leave any kind of notion about afterlife. So, what I'm trying to say, what interests me is the degree—the graspable degree of arbitrariness.

INTERVIEWER

What are your highest moments then—when you are working in the depths of language?

BRODSKY

This is what we begin with. Because if there is any deity to me, it's language.

INTERVIEWER

Are there moments when you are writing when you are almost an onlooker?

BRODSKY

It's awfully hard for me to answer. During the process of writing—I think these are the better hours—of deepening, of furthering the thing. You're kind of entitled to things you

didn't know were out there. That's what language brings you to, perhaps.

INTERVIEWER

What's that Karl Kraus line: "Language is the divining rod that discovers wells of thought"?

BRODSKY

It's an incredible accelerator of the cognitive process. This is why I cherish it. It's kind of funny, because I feel in talking about language I sound like a bloody French structuralist. Since you mention Karl Kraus at least it gives it kind of a continental thing to reckon with. Well, they have culture, we have guts, we Russians and Americans.

INTERVIEWER

Tell me about your love affair with Venice.

BRODSKY

In many ways it resembles my home town, St. Petersburg. But the main thing is that the place is so beautiful that you can live there without being in love. It's so beautiful that you know that nothing in your life you can come up with or produce—especially in terms of pure existence—would have a corresponding beauty. It's so superior. If I had to live a different incarnation, I'd rather live in Venice as a cat, or anything, but in Venice. Or even as a rat. By 1970 I had an *idée fixe* to get to Venice. I even had an idea of moving there and renting a ground floor in some palazzo on the water, and sit there and write, and drop my cigarette butts so they would hiss in the water. And when the money would be through, finished, I would go to the store and buy a Saturday special with what was left and blow my mind (*puts his finger to temple and gestures*).

So, the first thing I did when I became free to travel, that is, in 1972, after teaching a semester in Ann Arbor, I got a round-trip ticket for Venice and went there for Christmas. It is interesting to watch the tourists who arrive there. The beauty is such that they get somewhat dumbfounded. What they do initially

is to hit the stores to dress themselves—Venice has the best boutiques in Europe—but when they emerge with all those things on, still there is an unbearable incongruity between the people, the crowd, and what's around. Because no matter how well they're dressed and how well they're endowed by nature, they lack the dignity, which is partially the dignity of decay, of that artifice around them. It makes you realize that what people can make with their hands is a lot better than they are themselves.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have a sense when you're there of history winding down. Is that part of the ambiance?

BRODSKY

Yes, more or less. What I like about it apart from the beauty is the decay. It's the beauty in decay. It's not going to be repeated, ever. As Dante said: "One of the primary traits of any work of art is that it is impossible to repeat."

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of Anthony Hecht's *Venetian Vespers*?

BRODSKY

It's an awfully good book. It's not so much about Venice—it's about the American sensibility. I think Hecht is a superb poet. I think there are three of them in America, Wilbur, Hecht, and—I don't really know how to allocate that third palm.

INTERVIEWER

I'm interested to know why you put Wilbur up as high as you do.

BRODSKY

I like perfection. It's true that you don't hear the throbbings of the spheres, or whatever. However, the magnificence with which he uses the material compensates. Because—there is

poetry and poetry. There are poets and poets. And Dick performs his function better than anyone else.

I think that if I were born here I would end up with qualities similar to Hecht's. One thing I would like to be is as perfect as Hecht and Wilbur are. There should be something else, I presume, of my own, but insofar as the craftsmanship is concerned one couldn't wish for more.

INTERVIEWER

Is the communication between kindred spirits pretty close? Do you watch each other carefully? Walcott, Milosz, Herbert, yourself—poets sharing a certain terrain?

BRODSKY

Not exactly that I watch Derek, but, for instance, I got two poems of his quite recently scheduled to appear in *The New Yorker*—an editor sent me the xeroxes—and I thought "Well, Joseph—" I thought, "This is something to reckon with the next time you write a poem." (*laughs*)

INTERVIEWER

Who else is there to reckon with?

BRODSKY

Oh, there are lots of shadows and lots of real people. Eugenio Montale would be one of the living ones. There is a German, a very good German, Peter Huchel. Nobody in France, to my knowledge. I don't really take that poetry seriously. Akhmatova has remarked, very wisely, that in the twentieth century, French painting swallowed French poetry. As for England, I'm certainly a great fan of Philip Larkin. I like him very much. The only complaint is the usual one—that Larkin writes so little. Also, Douglas Dunn—and there is a magnificent man in Australia, Les Murray.

INTERVIEWER

What do you read?

BRODSKY

Some books on disciplines with which I wasn't well acquainted, like Orientalism. Encyclopedias. I almost don't have time for such things. Please don't detect snobbery in this; it's merely a very grand fatigue.

INTERVIEWER

And what do you teach? Does that affect your reading?

BRODSKY

Only insofar as I have to read the poem before the class does (*laughs*). I'm teaching Hardy and Auden and Cavafy—those three: it rather reflects my tastes and attachments. And Mandelstam, a bit of Pasternak.

INTERVIEWER

Are you aware that you are on a required reading list at Boston University for a course entitled "Modern Jewish Writing"?

BRODSKY

Well, congratulations to Boston University! Very good. I don't really know. I'm a very bad Jew. I used to be reproached by Jewish circles for not supporting the cause, the Jewish cause, and for having a great deal of the New Testament themes in my writing. Which I find absolutely silly. It's nothing to do with the cultural heritage. It's merely on my part the effect paying homage to its cause. It's as simple as that.

INTERVIEWER

You are also listed in a book called *Famous Jews*—

BRODSKY

Boy! Oh, boy! Well, *Famous Jews*—so I'm a famous Jew—that's how I'm going to regard myself from now on—

INTERVIEWER

What about some of the people you most admire? We've touched on some of the ones who have died. How about the living, people whose existence is important to you, if only to know they are there.

BRODSKY

Dick Wilbur, Tony Hecht, Galway Kinnell, Mark Strand. Those are just a few whom I know personally, and I'm extremely lucky in that sense. Montale, as I mentioned, would certainly be one; Walcott is another. And there are other people I like very much personally, and as writers. Susan Sontag, for instance. She is the best mind there is. That is on both sides of the Atlantic. Because, for her, the argument starts precisely where it ends for everyone else. I can't think of anything in modern literature that can parallel the mental music of her essays. Somehow, I can't separate people and writing. It just hasn't happened as yet that I like the writing and not the person. I would say that even if I know a person is dreadful I would be the first to find justifications for that dreadfulness if the writing is good. After all, it is hard to master both life and work equally well. So if you are bound to fake one of them, it had better be life.

INTERVIEWER

Tell me what it was like to meet Lowell for the first time.

BRODSKY

I'd met Lowell in 1972 at the Poetry International. He simply volunteered to read my poems in English as I read them in Russian, an extremely kind and moving gesture. So we both went on stage.

He invited me to come to Kent. I was somewhat perplexed—my English wasn't good enough. Also, I was somewhat worried about the railroad system in England—I couldn't make heads nor tails out of it. And the third, perhaps the primary reason why I didn't go, was that I thought it would be an imposition. Because, well, who the hell am I? And so, I just didn't do it.

Then in 1975 I was in the Five Colleges in Massachusetts, living in Northampton, and he called and invited me to come to Brookline. By that time my English was somewhat better and I went. The time we spent was in many ways the best time I can recall having while here in the States. We talked about this and that, and finally we settled on Dante. It was the first conversation about Dante since Russia which really made sense to me. He knew Dante inside out, I think, in an absolutely obsessive way. He was especially good on *Inferno*. I think he had lived for a while in Florence, or stayed there, so he felt more about *Inferno* than the other parts; at least the conversation revolved around those things.

We spent about five or six hours, more, and then we went for dinner. He said some very pleasant things to me. The only thing casting a shadow was that I knew that during Auden's last years they had had a row, kind of a lasting row. Wystan didn't like Lowell's extramoral situation, whereas Lowell was thinking that it was none of his business and was quite caustic about him as a poet.

INTERVIEWER

That doesn't sound like something Auden would worry about very much—

BRODSKY

In the sense that Wystan was a proper son of England, he would mind someone else's morality. I remember a remark he made. I asked him "What do you think of Lowell?" It was on the first day I saw Wystan. I sat down and started to grill him in my absolutely mindless way. He said something like "I don't like men who leave a smoking tail of weeping women behind them." Or maybe it was the other way around: "A weeping tail of smoking women"—

INTERVIEWER

Either way—

BRODSKY

Ya, either way. He didn't criticise Lowell as a poet. It was

simply kind of a commonplace morality at which I think he, Auden, enjoyed playing.

INTERVIEWER

But it was Auden, after all, who would have God pardoning various people for writing well—

BRODSKY

Ya, but he said that in 1939. I think, in a sense, that the reason behind all of this was that he insisted on faithfulness—in his own affairs as well as in a broader sense. Besides, he tended to become less flexible. When you live long you see that little things end up in big damages. Therefore, you get more personalized in your attitudes. Again, I also think it was kind of a game with him. He wanted to play schoolmaster and for that, in this world, he was fully qualified.

INTERVIEWER

If you could get either or both of them back, what kinds of things do you think you'd talk about now?

BRODSKY

Lots of things. In the first place—well, it's an odd question—perhaps about the arbitrariness of God. Well, that conversation wouldn't go far with Auden, merely because I don't think he'd like to talk about that heavy Thomas Mannish stuff. And yet, he became a kind of formal churchgoer, so to speak. I'm somewhat worried about that—because the poetic notion of infinity is far greater than that which is sponsored by any creed—and I wonder about the way he would reconcile that. I'd like to ask him whether he believes in the church, or simply the creed's notion of infinity, or paradise, or church doctrine—which are normally points of one's spiritual arrival. For the poet they are springboards, or points of departure for metaphysical journeys. Well, things like that. But mostly I would like to find out certain things about the poems, what he meant here and there. Whether, for instance, in "In Praise of Limestone" he really lists the temptations, or kind of translates the temptations as they are found in the Holy Book, or if they

simply came out like a poem, ya? (*long pause*) I wish he were here. More than anyone else. Well, that's kind of a cruel thing to say, but—I wish three or four people were alive to talk to. Him, Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva, Mandelstam—which already makes four. Thomas Hardy.

INTERVIEWER

Is there anyone you'd want to pull out from the ages?

BRODSKY

Oh, that would be a big crowd. This room wouldn't hold them.

INTERVIEWER

How did Lowell feel with respect to religion, finally?

BRODSKY

We never talked about it, except ironically, mentioning it en passant. He was absolutely astonishing talking about politics, or writers' weaknesses. Or human weaknesses. He was extremely generous, but what I liked in him was the viciousness of tongue. Both Lowell and Auden were monologists. In a sense, you shouldn't talk to people like them, you should listen to them—which is kind of an ultimate existential equivalent for reading poetry. It's a kind of spinoff. And I was all ears, partly because of my English.

He was a lovely man, really lovely—Lowell, that is. The age difference wasn't that big between us—well, some twenty years, so I felt in a sense somewhat more comfortable with him than with Auden. But then again, I felt most comfortable with Akhmatova.

INTERVIEWER

Did either one of them interrogate you in the way you wanted to be interrogated about yourself and your writing?

BRODSKY

Lowell did. Akhmatova asked me several questions. . . . But

while they were alive, you see, I felt as a young boy. They were the elders, so to speak, the masters. Now that they are gone I think of myself as terribly old all of a sudden. And . . . this is what civilization means, carrying on. Well, I don't think Auden would like rock music, nor do I. Nor Lowell, I think.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have any close friends who are artists, painters, musicians, composers?

BRODSKY

Here I don't. In Russia I had. Here the only person close to that is Baryshnikov. Composers, none at all. No, it's empty. The category of people I used to like most of all were graphic artists and musicians.

INTERVIEWER

But you draw a lot of sustenance from those realms.

BRODSKY

From music, yes. I don't really know how it is reflected in what I'm doing, but I certainly do.

INTERVIEWER

What do you listen to? I notice that Billie Holliday is on the turntable now—

BRODSKY

Billie Holliday's "Sophisticated Lady" is a magnificent piece. I like Haydn. Music is actually the best teacher of composition, I think, even for literature. If only because—well, the principle, for instance, of the concerto grosso: three parts, one quick, two slow, or vice versa. You know that you have to pour whatever you have into this twenty minute thing. Also, what can follow in music: the alternation of lyricism with mindless pizzicato, etcetera . . . they're like the shifts, counterpoints, the fluid character of an argument, a fluid montage. When I first began to listen to classical music, the thing that haunted

me was the way it moves, the unpredictability. So in that sense Haydn is terrific stuff because he's so absolutely unpredictable. *(long pause)* It's so silly. . . . I think how meaningless everything is, except for two or three things—writing itself, listening to music, perhaps a little bit of thinking. But the rest—

INTERVIEWER

How about friendship?

BRODSKY

Friendship is a nice thing. I'd include food then *(laughs)*. . . . But other things that you're forced to do—paying taxes, counting the numbers, writing references, doing your chores—don't all those things strike you as utterly meaningless? It's like when we sat in that cafe. The girl was doing something with the pies, or whatever—they were in that refrigerator with the glass. And she stuck her head in and she was doing all those things, the rest of her out of the refrigerator. She was in that position for about two minutes. And once you see it there's no point in existing any more. *(laughs)* Simple point, ya?

INTERVIEWER

Except that the minute you translate that into an image or a thought you've already taken it out of uselessness.

BRODSKY

But once you've seen it the whole of existence is compromised.

INTERVIEWER

It's coming back to time again—here because you're seeing the container with nothing in it.

BRODSKY

More or less, ya. Actually I read in the front of Penn Warren's recent book *(gets up and rummages at his desk)*: "Time is the dimension in which God strives to define his own

being.” Well, “strives” is a little bit kindergartenish. But there is another quote, this one from the encyclopedia: “There is, in short, no absolute time standard.”

INTERVIEWER

The last time I talked with you two things hadn’t happened. How much of your time is filled with being preoccupied with Afghanistan and the hostage situation?

BRODSKY

When I’m not writing or reading, I’m thinking about both. Of the two I think the Afghan situation is the most—tragic. When I saw the first footage from Afghanistan on the TV screen a year ago, it was very short. It was tanks rolling on the plateau. For thirty-two hours non-stop I was climbing the walls. Well, it’s not that I’m ashamed of being Russian. I have felt that already twice in my life: in 1956 because of Hungary and in 1968 because of Czechoslovakia. In those days my attitude was aggravated by immediate fear, for my friends if not for myself—merely because I knew that whenever the international situation worsens, it’s automatically followed by the internal crackdown.

But this is not what really blew my mind in Afghanistan. What I saw was basically a violation of the elements—because that plateau never saw a plough before, let alone a tank. So, it was a kind of existential nightmare. And it still sits on my retina. Since then I have been thinking about soldiers who are, well, about twenty years younger than me, so that some of them could be, technically speaking, my children. I even wrote a poem that said “glory to those that in the Sixties went marching into the abortion clinics, thereby saving the Motherland the disgrace.”

What drives me absolutely wild is not the pollution—it’s something much more dreadful. It’s something I think when they’re breaking ground to the foundation of a building. It’s usurpation of land, violation of the elements. It’s not that I am of a pastoral bent. No, I think, on the contrary, the nuclear power stations should be there—it’s cheaper than oil, in the

end.

But a tank rolling onto the plateau demeans space. This is absolutely meaningless, like subtracting from zero. And it is vile in a primordial sense, partly because of tanks' resemblance to dinosaurs. It simply shouldn't be.

INTERVIEWER

Are your feelings about these things very separate from what you write?

BRODSKY

I don't believe in writing it—I believe in action. I think it's time to create some sort of International Brigade. It was done in 1936, why not now? Except that in 1936 the International Brigade was financed by the GPU—that is, Soviet State Security. I just wonder if there's anybody with the money . . . somebody in Texas who could financially back the thing.

INTERVIEWER

What would you imagine the International Brigade doing?

BRODSKY

Well, the International Brigade can do essentially what it did in 1936 in Spain, that is, fight back, help the locals. Or at least give some sort of medical assistance—food, shelter. If there is a noble cause, it is this—not some Amnesty International . . . I wouldn't mind driving a Red Cross jeep . . .

INTERVIEWER

It's hard to identify clear moral sides sometimes—

BRODSKY

I don't really know what kind of moral sides you are looking for, especially in a place like Afghanistan. It's quite obvious. They've been invaded; they've been subjugated. They may be just backward tribesmen but slavery isn't my idea of revolution either.

INTERVIEWER

I'm talking more in terms of countries.

BRODSKY

Russia versus the U.S.? I don't think there is any question. If there were no other distinction between those two, it would be enough for me to have the system of a jury of twelve versus the system of one judge as a basis for preferring the U.S. to the Soviet Union. Or, to make it less complicated—because even that perplexes most people—I would prefer the country you can leave to the country you cannot.

INTERVIEWER

You've said that you are fairly satisfied with your Lowell poem which you wrote in English. Is there any reason why you didn't just continue writing in English?

BRODSKY

There are several reasons. In the first place, I have enough to do in Russian. And in English you have lots of terrific people alive. There is no point in my doing that. I wrote an elegy in English simply because I wanted to please the shadow. And when I finished *Lowell*, I had another poem coming in English. There were wonderful rhymes coming my way, and yet I told myself to stop. Because I don't want to create for myself an extra reality. Also, I would have to compete with the people for whom English is the mother tongue, ya? And, lastly, which is the most important, I don't have that aspiration. I'm pleased enough with what I'm doing in Russian, which sometimes goes and sometimes doesn't. When it doesn't, I can't think of trying it in English. I don't want to be penalized twice (*laughs*). And, as for English, I write my essays, which gives me enough sense of confidence. The thing is—I don't really know how to put it—technically speaking, English is the only interesting thing that's left in my life. It's not an exaggeration and not a brooding statement. That's what it is, ya?

INTERVIEWER

Did you read Updike's piece on Kundera in the *New York*

Times Book Review? He finished by referring to you, citing you as one who has dealt with exile by becoming an American poet—

BRODSKY

That's flattering, but that's rubbish.

INTERVIEWER

I imagine that he was referring not only to the fact that you have written a few things in English, but also to the fact that you were beginning to deal with American landscapes, Cape Cod—

BRODSKY

Could be—in that case, what can I say? Certainly one becomes the land one lives in, especially at the end. In that sense I'm quite American.

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel about writing something full of American associations in the Russian language?

BRODSKY

In many cases you don't have the Russian word for that, or you have a Russian word which is kind of cumbersome; then you look for ways around the problem.

INTERVIEWER

Well, you're writing about squad cars and Ray Charles' jazz—

BRODSKY

Ya, that you can do—because Ray Charles is a name, and "squad car" has an expression in Russian, and so does the hoop on the basketball pole. But the most difficult thing I had to deal with in that poem had to do with Coca-Cola, to convey the sensation that it reminded me of *Mene Mene Tekel Upharsin*, that line Belshazzar sees on the wall that foretold the end of his kingdom. That's where the expression "writing on the wall"

comes from. You can't say "Coca-Cola sign" because there's no idiom for that. So, I had to describe it in a rather round-about way—because of which the image rather profited. I said not "a sign," but something to the effect of the cuneiform or the hieroglyphics of Coca-Cola, ya? So that it reinforced the image of "the writing on the wall."

INTERVIEWER

What do you think happens psychically when you've brought the poem to a sort of dead point, to get beyond which you would have to go in a direction that you can't yet imagine?

BRODSKY

The thing is that you can always go on, even when you have the most terrific ending. For the poet the credo or doctrine is not the point of arrival but is, on the contrary, the point of departure for the metaphysical journey. For instance, you write a poem about the crucifixion. You have decided to go ten stanzas—and yet it's the third stanza and you've already dealt with the crucifixion. You have to go beyond that and add something—to develop it into something which is not there yet. Basically what I'm saying is that the poetic notion of infinity is far greater, and it's almost self-propelled by the form. Once in a conversation with Tony Hecht at Breadloaf we were talking about the usage of the Bible, and he said, "Joseph, wouldn't you agree that what a poet does is to try to make more sense out of these things?" And that's what it is—there's more sense, ya? In the works of the better poets you get the sensation that they're not talking to people any more, or to some seraphical creature. What they're doing is simply talking back to the language itself—as beauty, sensuality, wisdom, irony—those aspects of language of which the poet is a clear mirror. Poetry is not an art or a branch of art, it's something more. If what distinguishes us from other species is speech, then poetry, which is the supreme linguistic operation, is our anthropological, indeed genetic, goal. Anyone who regards poetry as an entertainment, as a "read," commits an anthropological crime, in the first place, against himself.

—Sven Birkerts

Portfolio

Philip Marlowe, where are you?
from
The Plain of Smokes

Text by Harvey Mudd
Illustrations by Ken Price

The Plain of Smokes is a long poem (nearly 1800 lines) utilizing and about, though by no means exclusively about, the city of Los Angeles. The poem has four distinctive voices, one of which is that of the archetypal Angeleno and urban foot-soldier, the private detective. Ken Price chose this section, entitled "Philip Marlowe, where are you?" and composed thirty original drawings to illustrate it. Approximately the last third of this section is extracted here. We are following the detective, through his own narration, on one investigative day, from waking in a cheap residential hotel in Hollywood to day's end. The case, of course, is murder: a young man has bled to death in a bathtub, under circumstances that recall the infamous Fatty Arbuckle case of the thirties. It is now mid-afternoon. . .

how's that for realism
so it's back into the car
which I'll be buried in

though it'll need
paint and tires first

and onto the hollywood inbound
to the pasadena
outbound
where the graffiti on the tunnel wall
say *save los trees*

which we should
because they are all dying
from cajon to cahuenga

and later
deeper into it
I find myself between the interchange
and chavez ravine
the department of water and power parking lot



and when I find finally a phone
there's a punk in it
wearing a black jacket
with *USS Indianapolis*
embroidered on it

I loved a woman once
whose father died on that tub
torpedoed in the china sea
losing all hands to sharks

the pacific she told me
is a monotonous nightmare
that we can not escape from

I have the sense
that I have dreamt all this before
and the end is horrible

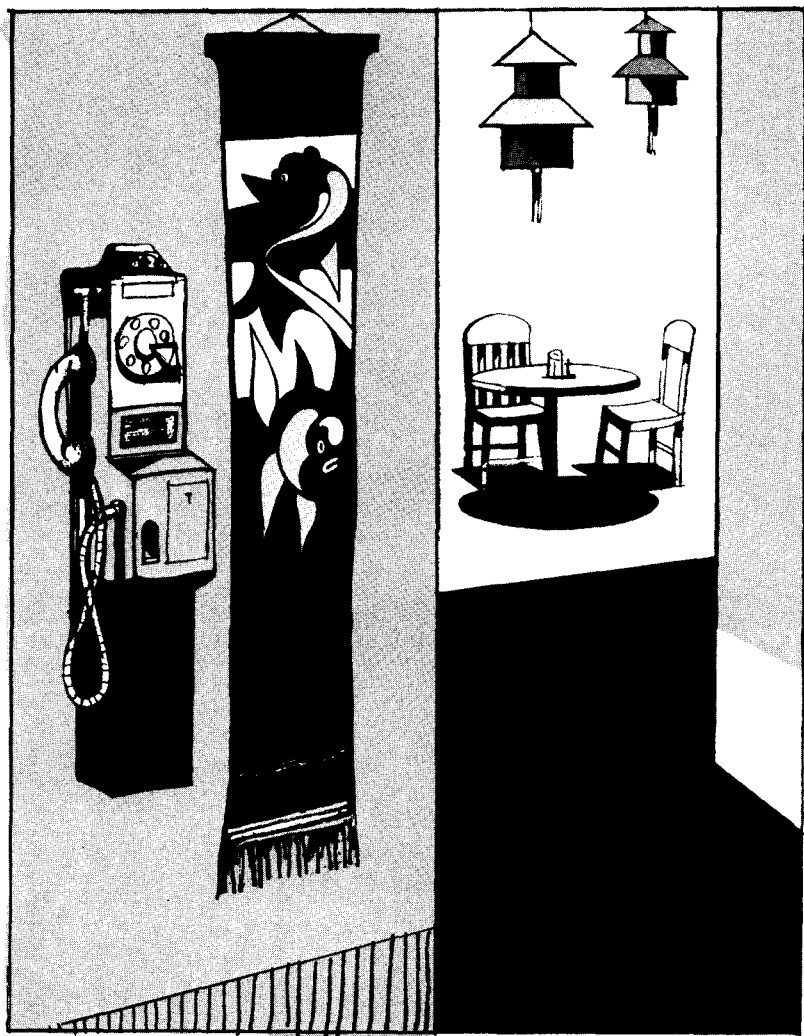
but nothing happens
wanna buy he says *some good shit*
and I say sonny
I know some real detectives downtown
so shove off

get screwed
he says

which is what is happening
I should quit this racket
go to the islands
and watch beautiful women

anything but this wandering
for thirty years in a town
that makes no sense

and ma bell's phones
don't work any better
than when she invented them



or the kid's broken it
because
the bitch takes my money
and gives nothing back
not even the recording

so I go into this vietnamese
or burmese cafe

the bao tung or something
and the people are like
they've never left whichever
devastated homeland it was

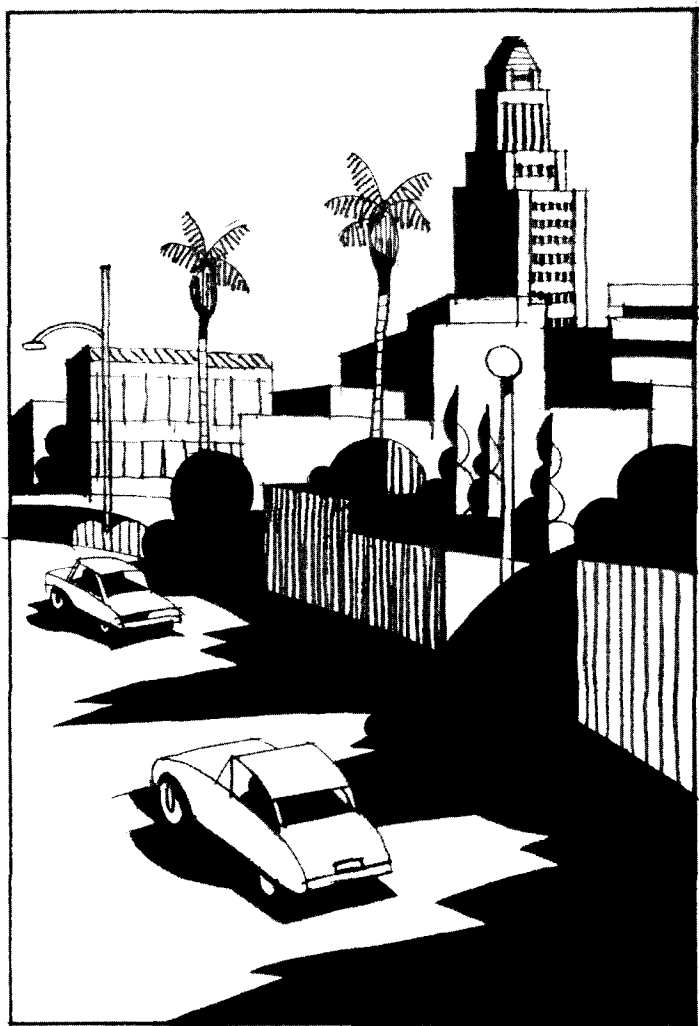
even the invitations in the john
are in whatever dying language it is

and they stare at me
as if I were the refugee
a sweating caucasian monster
emerging from the radioactive lagoon

but at least their phone works

so I call the girl
and get directions
into elysian park
a frame bungalow
covered with bougainvillea
she's underweight like I expected
mckuen and gibran on the coffee table
smell of cats and weed
*I knew she says
that he'd die someday
for love
though I'm glad
he didn't jump from something
I couldn't have endured that
we loved each other terribly*

it's the best we can do sometimes honey



I say to her call me
if you think of something

I go out to the car
the sun is sinking behind the smog
at the foot of wilshire

the heat is unbearable

nothing will come of this

I have that feeling

until finally
she comes out of the house
and drives the volkswagon into hollywood
to a sleazy hotel on wilcox

white metal

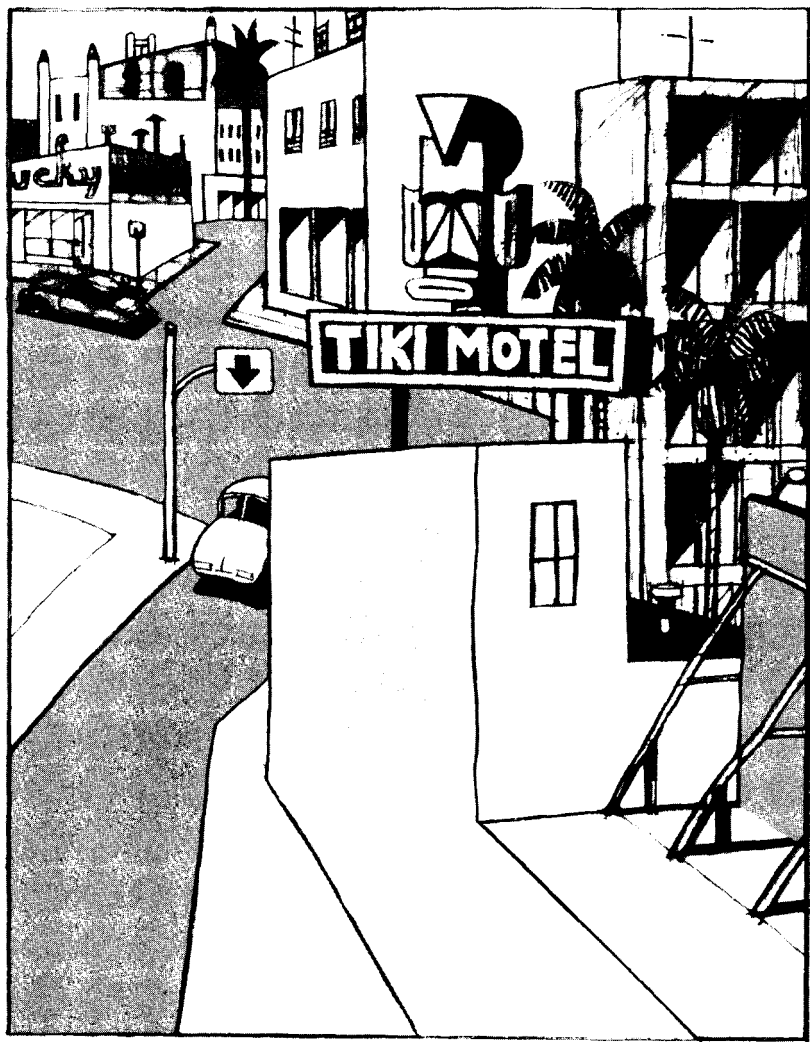
chairs in the lobby

waiting
I make an inventory
which I'll find in my notebook someday
and wonder what the hell
it had to do with

a case

or something

even more irrelevant
the matchbook
from the atomic bar and grill
6th and San Pedro
the statue of the virgin
in the bathroom
a map of los angeles
hidden in his underclothes
lipstick on the glass
though no woman could have done it
unless he let her
and outside the car



I see a gulf station
sign for a mortuary
wig maker and beauty college
institute of oral love
credit dentures
le club zebra

and over the hood ornament
the H on the sign

someday we'll look up
and see mighty joe young
tearing it down in his gorilla grief
and throwing the white letters
onto the freeway

the girl comes out of the hotel finally
with another fairy

must have a mother complex
like a lot of us do in america
it comes with the territory

a dead end this one
so I give up
and go back to the hotel
in the neon twilight

I pour myself
a stiff tequilla
the pure cactus
that I bring up myself from tj
I like the blue horseshoe
on the bottle

I'll have to go down soon
for another shipment
get loaded and laid
and have visions
like I did the last time



the gaudalupe I think she was
emerging from the surf off ensenada
with the crescent moon over her
and dolphins rising
like a million laughing
wet cherubs

she spoke to me
but I understand little mexican

the girl thought I was crazy
and called the madam
they threw me out into the gutter

stars were falling
in the gutter

a great night

once in a lifetime

I sit now at the window
and watch the cars creeping
along the boulevard

the hookers and midnight cowboys
waiting on the corners
like the salvation army

the movement of the lights

christ I think
I'm getting nowhere
a kid comes to hollywood
with high hopes

the sky's the limit
they must have said about him
back home
but falls



into some sort of error
and bleeds to death
from massive internal injuries
inflicted sexually

the mystery is that he seems
to have died happily
as if the injuring of tissue
tore blinders from his soul
and he had what?

a vision
that to be ravished just once
is the best we can hope for
ecstasy perhaps
the same as transcendence

though I doubt it

and what's worse
is that I can't figure even
the mechanics of it
was he buggered
by the king of hollywood himself
the wizard of fucking oz

how I remember wondering
do monkeys fly

o I could cry sometimes
in the evening
when it's nearly over

battle fatigue

on the tv john garfield
is dying again into the arms
of some pale beauty

I will always remember them



garfield
cagney
and bogey
remember as long
as there are cool rooms
for all that coiled celluloid

but I've already see it
so I turn it off
and listen to the night drone of the city
millions of automobiles
a murmur like insects

I sleep naked
like some sort of minor deity

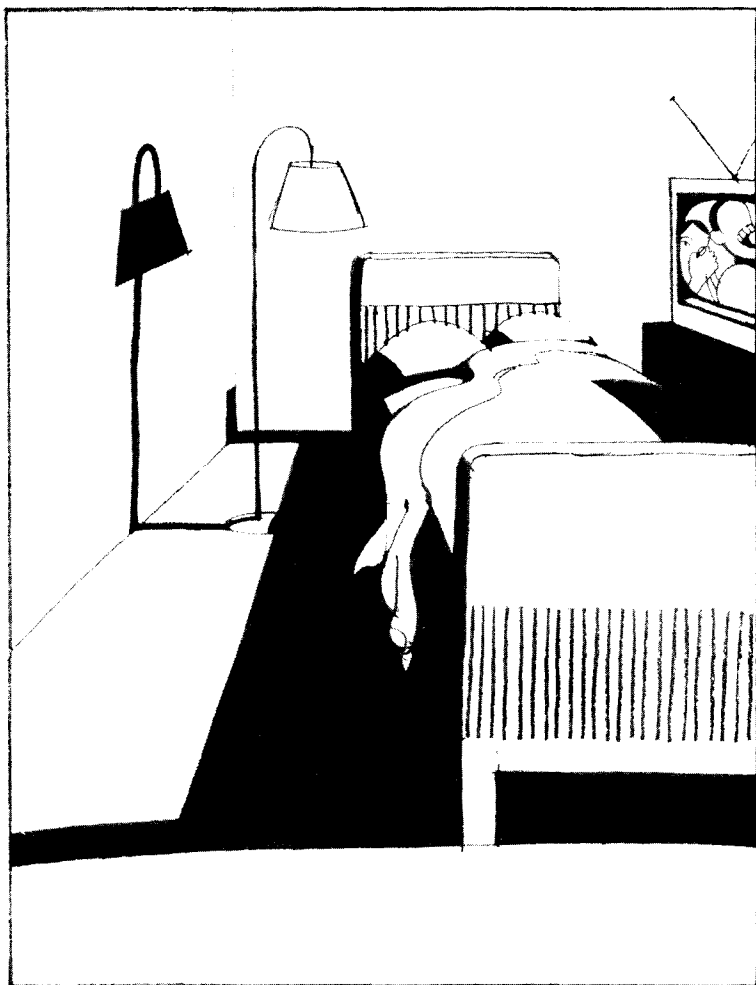
or maybe because I want always
to be ready for love
in hollywood

it gets to you after a while
and you almost believe it

it's too hot to sleep
but I do anyway

and dream the dream again
except now
the whole harbor is aflame

and the girl is dead



beautiful
like a movie star
blond hair tangled with seaweed
and spread out like a halo
on the timbers
her neck broken
by some terrible embrace
twisted
as if looking backwards
and for the first time
in thirty years
I've come up against it

I call out in my sleep
philip marlowe
where are you

someone is murdered
and they are murdering me/

The Plain of Smokes (© by Ken Price and Harvey Mudd) was originally published as a limited edition portfolio. This excerpt is reprinted with the permission of Arabesque Books, Box 3993, Santa Barbara, California 93105. The complete text with images will be published in the Fall of 1982 as a trade paperback and hardcover book by Black Sparrow Press.



The Time, The Place, The Loved One

Susan Welch

I spend a lot of time alone now. It doesn't bother me. The others took up too much time. I am glad that they are gone. But it is January and now and then I think of January in Minnesota, how in late afternoon a rusty stain appears along the rim of the sky and creeps across the ice. The stain seems to stay there forever, spreading beneath the banked tiers of white sky, until it fades suddenly into the snowbanks and is gone. It is bleak then, as if the sun has just slipped off the edge of the world. Then there is only the ice and the freezing wind on the ice as the sky gets blacker and blacker through the long, deep night.

I hardly ever think of Minnesota now that I am content in

Florida. There is a garden with a trellis and orange trees. The branches bend to me as I pluck the fruit, then spring back. As I bite into an orange I can taste the juice of the tree still in it, all its green leaves. The thorns on the rose bushes tear my skirt. The house has pillars and a courtyard; it is not far from the sea. Mal has given me all he promised. When Mal comes home he picks up my daughter at her school and she drinks lemonade while we drink scotch, sitting in the gazebo. By the time my head is clear again we have gotten through dinner and put the little girl to sleep and are upstairs, lying on the bed.

So I hardly ever think of Minnesota, how dark and still the winters are there. There was an apartment once, but I don't miss it, I just think about it sometimes when I consider how completely I have gotten out of the cold. From the street you could see a pale lamp shining through the window of the apartment, and the reflection of the lamp in the window; it was high up on the second floor above a store. Signs hung beneath the windows: Grimm's Hardware, Shaak Electronics—and together with the streetlights they cast a white glow into the big room all night long. Sometimes, coming home, we would see the snow falling silently in the beam of the streetlight, as if it were all a stage set.

Across the street was an all-night restaurant and sometimes people would leave there late, and yell to each other before they got into their cars. The first night I saw Matthew he was rushing down the stairs of our apartment building to confront some boys on the sidewalk near the restaurant. If I hadn't pressed against the railing he would have collided with me in his descent. I stood watching him through the glass of the door as he told the boys to be quiet, people were trying to sleep. They hooted and snickered as he turned to leave. As he came in the door, almost in tears, the boys were screaming in a mocking, falsetto chorus.

"They laughed at me," he said, bewildered, shutting the door against them, staring out. We started up the stairs together. He was tall and very thin, stooped even, pigeon-breasted in the t-shirt he wore in spite of the cold. His hair was a mass of ringlets and golden curlicues and it seemed full of its

own motion like something alive at the bottom of the sea. For a moment, standing in the hallway, he looked very beautiful and strange.

"I live here now," I told him. "In that apartment, there."

His face was haggard, lantern-jawed, but his eyes were gentle as he stared at me. "Come over and visit me tomorrow night," he said. "I'll bake you some brownies."

All day long I thought I wouldn't go. I stood for a long time in the hallway, looking from Matthew's door to mine, before I turned to knock on his. When he called "Wait a minute," I thought he was a girl, that's how light and high his voice was.

His apartment was immaculate. The wooden floor gleamed. There was a rug made up of swans' heads and necks, dark and light, facing in opposite directions—the neck of a dark swan provided the relief so you could see the neck of a white swan and so on. It was impossible to hold both the white and dark swans together in your mind at the same time. There was a bed at one end of the large room, a table with two chairs, and windows that faced the street all along the wall. There were no pictures up, just plants on a shelf, purple passion, jade plant, wandering jew, and a bulletin board studded with funny clip-pings, cartoons, a picture of a bald woman in a long smock.

"I see her all the time at school," Matthew said. "She goes to all the rallies and concerts and just walks around the university."

He was wearing a t-shirt that said "Minnesota" and a pair of jeans that hung on him. I saw that he was not handsome at all. He was bony and long and his joints, his elbows and wrists and probably his knees, were huge, like a puppet's.

"How old are you?" I asked.

"Twenty-one," he said, but he looked sixteen or seventeen. "You?"

"Twenty-five."

"I couldn't imagine what your age was," he said. "People are always drawn to you, your looks, aren't they?"

"My mother was beautiful. She's dead," I said.

I looked out the window and saw how the dark was settling in. When I was eighteen I won a beauty prize, Princess Kay of

the Milky Way at the Minnesota State Fair. They sculpted my face in a thirty-pound block of butter, put the bust in a refrigerated glass case and ran it round and round on a kind of merry-go-round so people at the fair could look at it. I liked it and went every day to see it, standing on the dirt floor near the glass, wondering if anyone would recognize me, but they never did. My father told me I looked like my mother in the sculpture, but he thought it was dumb of me to stand around there all day. He made me come home.

“What in the world brought you to this place?” Matthew asked, and then I told him how I had come to be there. I must have been lonely, or starved for someone so nearly my own age, I know that’s what made me pour out my feelings to him so. I told him how I had met Mal when I took a job in his publishing company, and how he had left his wife and children for me, and how he had taken me to live with him five years ago, right after my father died. I told him how Mal called me his suburban Botticelli and how he took care of me and taught me all he knew. Now Mal had sold out his interest in the Minneapolis company and we were moving to Florida, where he had a new business. But I had never been out of Minneapolis, my parents had died here, it was all too sudden. I begged him to let me have a couple of months here, work in the business as it changed hands, get used to the idea of leaving as he got our new life settled. I had found this apartment in a familiar area, near the university, where I, too, had gone to school. Matthew was looking at me so hard his jaw hung.

It was late autumn, just before Halloween, and Matthew and I watched out the window as the sky went down from copper to livery red to mother of pearl. The streetlights blinked on and so did the signs above the stores. The room darkened with the sky but the signs and streetlights shed pools of incandescent light on the bed, on the floor.

“What kind of person would leave his wife and children?” Matthew asked.

I sat with my head in my hands. “I don’t know, he felt so awful about it. They’d been married twenty years. He told me not to think about it. He said it was my face; he loved my face.”

I pressed my fingers into my cheeks. The flesh gave like wax. But suddenly I was asking myself, what kind of person was Mal, to leave his wife and children. I had never thought of him in that way before.

Then slowly Matthew began to tell me about himself. It was hard for him to talk, he didn't charm me with what he said or the way he said it, no, not at all. His voice was a whisper and sometimes it cracked as it came out, no, not a man's voice at all. He had been in love with a girl and she hadn't loved him, but still he kept loving her and loving her and finally he had gone crazy.

He told me what it was like to be crazy. Everything seemed to have a secret meaning, cracks on the sidewalk, a phone that rang once but not again, the world was full of hidden messages.

"It sounds wonderful," I said. "I would love to feel that everything had a secret meaning."

He shook his head and his curls bounced. "You don't know what you're saying. No, it wasn't wonderful at all. It was horrible."

"And the girl?"

"She's gone. Gone a long time ago."

It was hard to talk to him, I had to strain to hear him, his murmurs. It was as if he were used to talking in whispers to himself. His father was a doctor, his mother wanted him to be a doctor, but he couldn't do it, his grades weren't good enough, he couldn't concentrate. So instead he was taking this degree in psychology, maybe something would come of that.

I don't know what it was, I didn't want to leave him. After a while he got up and turned on the lamp by the window, then he put on a record.

"I like that a lot," I said. "Mal and I don't listen to any rock, just classical. Bach. Vivaldi. Telemann. A lot of baroque."

"Don't you know any people your own age?"

I looked at him. "Hardly any. There are a few girls at work but I don't see them much."

It was late when I got up to go. I walked along the shiny dark floor to the door. The lamp shone on the green leaves of the plants and reflected white in the window. I could feel the cold

on the street below seeping in around the window frames.

Matthew followed me and stood with me by the door. I thought I had never seen such a delicate-looking man. I could almost see the blood beating in his temples. He took my hands in his huge bony hands. I felt it only for an instant but my hands were throbbing where he had touched them.

A few days later I found a copy of the album we had been listening to wrapped and pushed under my door. When I walked over to Matthew's apartment I could hear the bass pounding in the record he was playing. I stood in the hall for a moment but the door opened.

"I heard your footsteps," he said. But how could he have heard me over the music? We stared at each other. He looked gawky and stupid. I wondered why I had come. "Listen, I've got a coupon for a pizza," he said. "Do you want to go?"

As we walked he took my hand in his. I couldn't take it back, his own hand trembled so.

"They removed a rat's memory surgically today," he said. And all through dinner we talked about how the rat experienced everything for the first time, every time.

When he himself had gone crazy, Matthew said, he thought about the same things over and over again. He had thought then that he was refining memories, getting down to their essence and their core. Now he realized that that was impossible.

His way of talking was innocent and strange. He thought differently from other people and I had to listen carefully to catch his meaning. Neither of us ate much. We pushed the pizza back and forth between us.

"Do you want to come back over?" he asked as we walked out into the bitter cold. He took my hand again. I just wanted to be with him, I don't know why. Perhaps I admired the sculpted, jutting angle of his cheekbones. He made some coffee and got out a box of fresh pastries from the bakery downstairs. He sat across the table from me, staring down at the coffee, his long legs stretched out until his feet nearly touched mine. The white light enclosed us in a long oval. He shook his

head and ruffled his fingers fiercely through his curls.

“Your hair is so unusual,” I said.

“I was helping my father give EEGs last summer,” he said. “One lady saw me and wouldn’t let them put the electrodes on. She thought that was what had happened to me.”

We laughed. At that moment, I looked at him and he looked at me. I felt a dizziness, a tightness near my heart. I was snug, safe in his apartment against the cold—I’m sure that’s what it was. I have thought about it since.

He put a record on and we were silent, sitting in the pool of light.

After a while he came over and knelt beside me and wrapped his arms around my waist. I could see the top of his head, his bobbing curls.

“Matthew, I have a lover.”

He ignored me and put his cheek next to mine, holding my head. I could see the fine grain of his gold skin, how tight it was on the bone.

“Do you want to go lie down with me?” he asked and I nodded, yes.

I looked into his face as he undressed me and saw that his eyes were all pupil. For a long time he stroked the place where my hip met my thigh, running his fingers over the pale blue traceries of the veins.

“I love you,” I said. Yes, I remember I said it, and I said it many times, I don’t know what came over me. And I thought, this is the most wonderful night of my life, nothing will ever be this sweet again. We stared at each other in the light of the streetlamps and the Grimm’s Hardware sign and we made love. All night long we looked into each other’s eyes. He was so young I could see that his eyes were brand new, just budded in their sockets.

Sometimes even now I fancy I can feel Matthew’s tongue, scratchy as a cat’s, and the way he wrapped me up in his long, long arms. But I scarcely think of him at all now. In fact, I have entirely forgotten him. If it weren’t for the little girl, considering her as much as I do, and the way the days are so long for me here, I doubt that I would think of him at all.

Three days later I went to work again. The phone was ringing as I walked into my office and I picked it up, knowing it was Mal. There had been a short circuit in one of the stereos in the electronics store and all night music from a rock station had pounded up to us through the floorboards. Elton John, Matthew told me they were playing. "Love Song." "Come Down in Time."

"What are you telling me?" Mal asked. "You were walking along, just minding your own business, and you got hit by a freight train?"

Light from the apartment flooded into my eyes and behind them as I held the receiver, the pure light on Matthew's face as he twined me with his legs and arms.

"I never should have left you alone, I knew it was a mistake," Mal said. And when I didn't answer he said: "I'm coming up there."

He was waiting for me in the office the next morning. For a long time he wouldn't believe that I was serious, that I wasn't coming down to Florida.

"I suppose his teeth are all white, not stained like mine," Mal said. "And I suppose he has all his hair and a flat belly, that's what you're thinking when you look at me, isn't it?"

"No, it's not," I said, but now that he'd said it it became true. All I was worried about was that he would kill me, and then I wouldn't be able to be with Matthew.

I wanted to tell him how fond I felt of him, how grateful I felt, how it hurt me to see his eyes glaze as he slumped against the window. But I stood speechless.

"I gave up everything for you. I can't let you go," he said.

For a moment I thought of the filthy warped floor in the hall of my apartment building, the way the brown paint on the floors bubbled and peeled. "I was a child then," I said. "That was for then."

I turned my face away as he held me.

"There's nothing I can do," he said. "I can't live without you." For an instant I prayed, begging that Mal would not die.

Then, miraculously, he was gone. He had me fired from my job but I found another where I just had to type. I bore no

grudges. I was walking on love's good side. I had Matthew.

From our first night together Matthew was always in my thoughts. I suppose you could say I lived for him. He wanted us to be twins.

"One consciousness in two bodies," he said. "That's what we are." He looked at me in a way that made me feel holy. No one had ever paid this kind of attention to me, no, never. He painted our toenails the same color, green with silver dust. When I got a pimple he would often get one himself, in a similar spot. We wore each other's clothes, bought matching shoes. We copied each other, walked alike, talked alike. How I loved imitating Matthew. It was no longer lonely being me. We could be each other.

We had been together two months when I found out I was pregnant. Matthew had told me not to get another diaphragm, there could be no mistakes between us. Anything that happened was right.

When I told him, he smiled. "That's wonderful," he said. "I can't wait to tell my family. Now we'll get married."

We drove out to the suburbs for dinner so I could meet his parents. He had told them about me but they had resisted meeting me, until now. We drove to a ranch house with a swimming pool behind it, big as a gulch. His father was a tall, silent man who left in the middle of dinner to go to the hospital. His mother had Matthew's jagged features but none of his softness. She hated me on sight.

After dinner she took me aside.

"Do you realize what a sick boy he is?" she asked. "You're a grown woman, you should see these things. He's been institutionalized for long periods."

"I love him," I said calmly. "He loves me. He knows exactly what he's doing. And it's medieval to think of mental illness as a permanent condition. You get over it, like a cold."

"What do you know about it?" She stared until I dropped my gaze. "Have you ruined your life, eating your heart out over him?"

We left before dessert.

“Cheer up, honey. We have to go out and get some sour cream cherry pie, some cheesecake,” Matthew said as we sat in the car in his mother’s driveway. He started kissing me, digging his fingers into my thighs. “There’s a great place near here. You’ll love their hot fudge cake,” he said. “I can’t take my honey to bed before she has her dessert.”

We went to a delicatessen where cakes and pies dipped up and down on little ferris wheels. “It tastes as good as it looks, too,” Matthew said. We held hands and fed each other hot fudge and cherries on heaping spoons. The rich goo dripped like wax. We nudged and stepped on each other’s feet the whole time, pressing each other’s soles and toes till they hurt.

“Why doesn’t she like me?” I asked. “Is it because I’m older?”

“She’ll get over it, don’t worry about her,” Matthew said. “All she knows is her Bible. That time when I got sick—she thought it was God’s rebuke to her. She’s just going to have to get used to it.”

I scraped some hot fudge on my plate with my spoon. It dried fast, sweet cement. “You’re so old for your age, Matthew. I’m surprised she can’t see it. I’ve always known I could depend on you.”

He fed me the last bite of hot fudge cake. “How about some more?” he asked. “Come on, honey, you know you want it.”

“Let’s have the hazelnut torte,” I said.

“Great,” Matthew said. “Great. My mother would die. She believes in minimal sweets.”

“Mal too,” I said. “Seaweed and spinach. He made us eat seaweed and spinach every stupid day.” We both grimaced, wrinkling our noses.

Matthew stared into my eyes and jammed my feet tight between his. “Hi, baby.” I saw his mouth move but no sound escaped his lips. The waitress put the torte before him. Shrugging and rolling his eyes at me he plunged his fork into the crest of hazelnut lace.

We got married and I moved all my things into Matthew’s apartment. Our lives went on much as before.

How did those days pass? They went by so quickly I swear I can't remember. We had everything in the world to find out about each other.

He took pictures of me with an expensive camera his parents had given him for his birthday. He gloated over the prints. "Look how you're smiling," he said. "How happy I must make you." He set the time adjustment so we could be in pictures at the same time, hugging or kissing or with our heads together, staring at the camera. "What a beautiful couple," he said.

He played his guitar as we sang duets of rock songs. He was charmed by my flat singing voice. He even admired my upper arms which had started to get pudgy from all our desserts. He flapped the loose flesh with delight. "That's one of the things I love about you most," he said. "Chubby arms, just like a little baby."

One freezing night as we walked home after a movie our boots crunched into the moonlight on the snow. Our gloved hands fitted into each other like the pieces of a puzzle.

"What should we name the baby?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said.

"If it's a girl how about Phoebe, after the moon," he said. "The moon is so beautiful, look how we're walking on silver, baby. And it always seems to have so many secrets."

"But we don't like secrets, Matthew," I said. "We don't believe in secrets."

"I bet she'll look like the moon," he said. "You'll get round like the moon and then the baby will come out and look like the moon."

I woke up once during the night. He was sleeping with his arms around my neck. He slept silently, like an infant. How could he be so quiet? The lights outside flooded his bulletin board, the shiny wooden floors, the carefully arranged cabinets. The radiators hissed then fizzled to stop. Outside the window the full moon shared the secret of the shadows on the dark street, his beating heart. I almost woke him up to tell him. I wanted to say, I could die now. I am so happy I could just die.

For Valentine's Day he wrote me a song. I sat on the bed while he played it for me on his guitar. He didn't need to breathe with my lungs filling his, the song said. He wanted to die from drinking my wonderful poison. I listened, filled with wonder.

As he played I watched his hands. For the first time I saw tiny scars on his wrists, fine and precise as hairs. When he finished playing I put my fingers to his pulse.

"Your wrists, Matthew," I said. "Look. Where did all those little marks come from?" He had never told me, yet he said he told me everything.

He withdrew his hands, fixing me with his long stare. "Let's stay in the here and now. Why talk about things that happened a long time ago, things you can't remember right anyway. What did my honey get for me?"

I had forgotten Valentine's Day. The next day I bought him a shirt and an expensive sweater. He thanked me but seemed disappointed. His mother could have given him the same. He had been involved in his gifts, mine were clichés.

The next day I got a valentine from Mal, forwarded from the old office. He loved me, he was thinking about me, he wanted me to come back to him. As I put it in the waste basket I found the valentine I had given Matthew folded at the bottom.

In the dead of winter it was fifty below for days at a time. We would sit on the bed and watch the smoke rise out of the chimneys in timid frozen curls. When we came home late at night, walking across the huge U of M campus, we would have to kiss and hold each other for twenty minutes before our noses and fingers thawed.

On Sunday mornings we would have breakfast at the restaurant across the street. We sat facing each other, our legs locked, talking about what was happening in our lives. I treasured my separate life for it provided me with stories to tell him. Nothing was real until I told Matthew about it.

After breakfast I walked him to his part-time job at the laboratory where he was working on a hearing experiment. Chinchillas were made deaf in one ear and then trained to

jump to one side of a large revolving cage or another, on the basis of certain sounds. If the chinchillas didn't perform correctly they got a shock. That was Matthew's job, running them through tests and shocking them if they made mistakes.

I went with him once and saw the little animals in their cages. They were furry and adorable, bunnies without ears: how could Matthew, the gentlest of people, stand to shock them?

"They have to be shocked when they're not doing their job," he said. "It's horrible, but that's the way life is."

"Since when do you believe life is that way?"

One evening he came home shaking. A chinchilla had died when its eardrum was being punctured for the experiment.

"Matthew, why don't you quit that job?" I asked, looking up at him from where I sat at the table. "Don't you see what it's doing to you?"

"It's not doing anything to me. I'm fine," he said, standing there trembling. "Do you think you're better, that you wouldn't do that job?"

I stood up and rushed to him. "Matthew, are you angry at me? Please don't be angry at me. I just want you to be happy." I hugged him tighter, tighter. "Do I give you everything you want?" I whispered into his shoulder. "What can I give you?"

"You're everything I want," he said.

"But is it enough? You're so much better at being somebody's lover than I am."

"Yes, I am good at that, aren't I," Matthew said, and I could feel him thinking about it, there was a hum in him like currents in fluorescent tubes.

Then he held my shoulders and looked deeply into my eyes. "Come here, baby. Let me tell you about this experiment I've been thinking about all day."

We sat down at the table holding hands. "When they fasten electrodes to the pleasure centers of a rat's brain the rat will do nothing but push the bar that activates the electrode. It won't eat, it won't drink, it won't sleep, it just keeps pushing the bar for the pleasure sensation until it dies of starvation and dehydration."

We sat silent. "That's interesting," I said. I watched his hand as it moved slowly up my arm, to my shoulder, then curled around my neck.

"You," he said. "You."

Late afternoons Matthew would go to the bakery downstairs and come back with boxes of sweets. Then we would sit at the table, listening to the voices on the street, feeling how the winds lightened and the air became less bitter as spring blew in our windows. We watched the sun on the grain of the table. We cut eclairs with knives and fed them to each other. When Matthew ate chocolate he was in such ecstasy he had to close his eyes. I could see him shudder. It was like when we were in bed. Being around all those sweets made me greedier for them, it was strange. The more I ate the more I wanted. It was like being in bed.

I got fatter and fatter from the sweets.

"If you can't get fat when you are pregnant, when can you?" he asked, feeding me another pastry. Yet Matthew never got fat.

I ate cakes, petits fours, upside down tarts. At the soda fountain around the corner he fed me hot fudge sundaes.

"Eat, baby," he said. "I love to see your little tongue when you lick the syrup."

My breasts became huge. I swelled like an inflatable doll. All night long Matthew would lie in my arms as I lay there puffed with life and the splitting of my own cells. When we woke up he went downstairs and got doughnuts, filled and frosted pastries called honeymooners, pecan rolls.

Before long it was spring verging on summer and we took long walks along the Mississippi, breathing the crisp shocking air that rose from the torrents of icy water that came with the thaw. Sometimes we took sandwiches and stayed out till two in the morning. On one walk a pale, ovoid form approached us. It was the bald woman whose picture was on Matthew's bulletin board.

She stopped Matthew, held on to his arm, mumbled to him.

She had been at the zoo, she said, and fed the elephant peanuts. It had lifted them out of her hand with its trunk, she said, holding up her palm, showing it. Its soft trunk had tickled and nudged her hand, gentle, tender. She could feel its hairs.

"Do you know her?" I asked Matthew, watching her as she disappeared. But Matthew wouldn't answer.

One afternoon after a rock concert we followed the path along a cliff near the river; below us the Mississippi glimmered like diamonds. We walked hand in hand but I was waddling fast to keep up with Matthew's long strides.

"Let me catch up," I said, and he stared at me, his eyes hard.

"You know I've been thinking," he said, walking faster. "We're really not that much alike."

I couldn't catch my breath. The air was freezing my fingertips even where Matthew held them.

"Like how so?"

"Like make-up," he said. "Like you wear make-up and I don't."

My eyes watered from the wind. "But I've always worn make-up," I said. "I'll stop wearing it if you don't like it."

"That won't do any good," he said. "And you take up a lot of the bed. It's hard for you to keep up with me when I walk."

"But I'm pregnant, I've got fat," I said, nearly in tears. "If I weren't pregnant and if you didn't force all that food on me, this wouldn't happen."

Tears were streaming down my face but Matthew was walking fast, not seeming to notice.

"I don't make enough to support a baby," Matthew said. "It's all going to be different. It seems cruel. Sometimes I think I can't do the job."

"You know I've got savings. And your parents will help." Now I couldn't stop crying. I halted in my tracks, jerking my hand out of his. The Mississippi roared below us. I waited for long moments by a tree, waiting for him to come back. And suddenly I knew that we would never again be as happy as we once were.

Finally he came back, retracing his steps, and looked at me.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I never want to hurt you."

I looked into his eyes and saw how young and frightened he was. I will never leave you, I said to myself. You need me and I will always take care of you.

That night in our room rainy air billowed the curtain inward on our long embrace. There was the smell of skin, warm salt flesh, clean.

"Please baby, whatever you say, never say you stopped loving me," Matthew said.

"Oh, never. I would never say that."

"You would never start hating me, would you? You would stop long before that."

Stop? He had never said anything about stop. "No. I would stop before that."

"We would stop while we still loved each other. And now . . . are you going to hug me all night long?"

The next day, on impulse, I called up Mal from work.

I couldn't even wait for him to get over his shock. I rushed into it. "You won't believe this, but I've just got to talk to someone. About Matthew. It's just interesting, you won't mind? He's absolutely terrified of getting fat. He is the skinniest man you've ever seen, yet he's worried about fat. Once he went on a fishing trip with his father and he ate a whole pound bag of M & Ms and he was so appalled he didn't eat anything else the whole trip. And by summer he had got so thin he could see the sun shining through his rib cage. Can you imagine anything so stupid?"

"He loves sweets, you know, we live near a bakery, and sometimes he'll get so many good things and eat them, then do you know what he does? He sticks his finger down his throat and throws them up. Really, I've seen him do it."

Mal listened, silent, until I was done. "Why don't you leave him?" he said.

"Because I'm happy, that's why," I said, suddenly desperate to be off the phone. "Besides, I'm very fat, do you think you could like me fat?" He didn't answer. "I was just kidding about him throwing up. Do you believe me?" Mal was silent. "Well, maybe he did it once or twice when he was drunk."

"Do you know why I'm fat?" My voice grew shriller in the silence. "Because I'm pregnant. I'm going to have a baby in two months."

I pressed down the button, hoping he would think we'd been disconnected.

I came home from work one afternoon and found Matthew lying naked on the bed, his stereo earphones on, one leg propped straight up against the wall. He was so absorbed in the music he didn't see me coming up to him, see how I was staring at the long red marks on the inside of his thigh. As I sat down beside him he took his leg down quickly and removed the headset, smiling.

"It's spring," I said. "It's gorgeous out, Matthew."

"It's pretty," he said. "Have a good day?"

"Did you?" He said he hadn't been out and, leaning back again, he pulled me down with him. I moved away.

"Matthew, let me see your thigh." He watched me docilely as I lifted his leg. It was as if it were a specimen we were both going to examine.

"What are those red marks from?" I asked.

"Me."

"How did you do it?"

"With my own little fingernails," he said.

They weren't scratches, they were deeper than that. The gold hairs on his thighs spoked up innocently around.

"Matthew, why did you do it?" He took his leg down.

"Don't worry about it. It's nothing. It's something I do sometimes. I put iodine on it, it won't get infected."

"But why did you do it?"

"Because I was having evil thoughts."

"About what?"

He shook his head. "Don't worry about it." He eased me back down. "Don't worry your little head," he said. "Baby. Double baby. Baby to the second power. Baby squared." He started moving his hands up and down my body.

I pulled away. "Wait."

"What's the matter, baby?" he asked, touching me all over.

I felt his tongue in my mouth and I closed my eyes.

One night he came in late, very agitated.

"There was this guy following me down the street just now for about a mile. He was this weird, juiced-up black guy even skinnier than I am. He was muttering, calling me sweet cakes, doodle-bug, boney maroney. Can they tell about me?" he asked, looking into my face. "Can they tell I've been crazy? Do I give out special vibes?"

I thought of the tense air he always had, the speed of his walk on those long legs.

"He followed me all that way. He kept saying, 'Think you're pretty hot stuff, you creep, you creep.'"

And the bald lady, had he seen her? Matthew wouldn't answer.

"People can't tell," I said finally, but he wouldn't stop looking at me.

"Why are you staring?" I asked.

"Because you're so nice and fat," he said, still staring.

Behind that gaze there was an intensity that had nothing to do with me. I felt something ungiving in him, the tightness of his skin on the bone. "Stop making me eat," I said. "You're turning me into a monster."

"But honey," he said smiling. "I likes you fat." Then his expression changed. It was a dark look he gave me. "You're eating with your own mouth," he said.

I called up Mal again. "Can you imagine?" I said. "He washes his hair every morning because he doesn't want dirt to accumulate too close to his brain. He's afraid it will penetrate and sink in. And scratches himself with his fingernails when we have a fight. When I told him to stop buying me so many sweets he thought I hated him and you know what he did? He put a long cut down the top of his arm with a knife."

"He's crazy," Mal said. "Don't you know you've got a mental case on your hands? Why don't you get out before he does something to you?"

"He won't do anything to me," I said, but it was a long time

before I could hang up the phone.

When I came home that night Matthew was sitting at the table with a stack of pictures. I sat down beside him.

"What are they of?" I asked.

He looked annoyed but said nothing. I slid the pictures over and started going through them. They were all of him. He had taken twenty-four pictures of his own face: laughing, smiling, stern, pensive, in profile, in three-quarter view, from the back.

"These are really good," I said. "When did you take them?"

"I've really changed a lot," he said. "I suspected it, but I can tell from the pictures how drastic it is."

"How have you changed?"

"In ways." He put his hand over his mouth, staring at me and then staring at nothing.

"Why are you so indifferent to me?" I said.

"I'm not indifferent." He took the stack of pictures and began looking through them again, humming to himself.

"Why don't you take my picture?"

He continued to sort through the pictures, humming.

"Why don't you take my picture, Matthew?"

There was a long silence. "Sure, I'll take your picture sometime," he said, and I saw how his hair flared out in the photographs, like a sea fan.

I remember every detail of the next few days. It was the hottest part of the summer in Minnesota. Night after night I went sleepless in the motionless air, hanging over the side of the bed so Matthew would have more room. I was so huge and moist my nightgown clung to me like a membrane. I had to take it off and lie naked on top of the sheet. When I tried to meet Matthew's eyes he looked away.

"It will all be different after the baby comes," I whispered to him, but he pretended to be asleep.

One evening I could hardly walk when I got off the bus after work. With every step my fat thighs rubbed against each other. They had become so sore and chapped they had begun to

bleed. As I walked past the bakery the heat rose in waves; behind the window, a sheet of sunlight, I saw wedding cakes, gingerbread men, cookies with faces, shimmering.

I heard music coming from our apartment. I twisted my key again and again in the lock. Surely Matthew could hear me? I punched my knuckles against the door. I tried the key again and the lock gave suddenly.

The room was filled with smoke. Matthew was sitting on the bed with the bald woman and a short black man who was even skinnier than he was.

"We're tripping," Matthew said. "But there's nothing left for you."

"Who is that?" said the bald woman.

"She lives down the hall."

"I do not live down the hall and you know it, Matthew," I said. "I live here and I'm his wife." I stood there awhile and nobody looked at me. I put down my purse and sat down next to it on the floor.

"These are my friends. They're like me," Matthew said. He looked at me with the eyes of a little animal, eyes that were all pupil, the color black, absorbing everything and giving nothing back.

"He's a cabdriver," Matthew said. "You wouldn't think of having a cabdriver for a friend, would you? Or a busdriver? I like cabdrivers."

"I would so have a cabdriver for a friend," I said, but I couldn't think of a single friend I did have. Matthew was my only friend.

"You wear make-up and you're fat and you only want to be friends with editors," Matthew said. "Oh, yes, and friends with Uncle Mal." The bald woman edged closer to Matthew on the bed. Her hand brushed my pillow, the pillow I had brought to Matthew from my old bed. She whispered in his ear, moving her hand to his hip, to the front of his pants.

"We're going now," Matthew said, standing up.

"Wait a second, I'll come too," I said.

"Do you want her to come?"

"No way," said the bald woman.

"See? They don't want you to come," Matthew said. "They're my friends and they're like me and they don't want you to come."

I stood still as they passed, stupefied by my pain.

"Matthew, please don't go!" I said. "It's just a tough time now, baby. Isn't it?"

He stopped in the doorway, staring down at me. A vein like a root throbbed in his temple. His face blurred in my gaze and I saw his eyes staring wide at me as we made love on that bed, silver ghosts in the wash of pale neon. I saw the snow falling silently as we hurried home in the cold, looking high up for the glow of the lamp in our apartment.

He put his hands on my shoulders. His palms and fingers cut into me like brackets. "Stay here," he said.

I watched him from the window but he did not turn to look back up at me.

I lay on the bed watching the ceiling change as it got darker and darker. I don't know how long I lay there or when the pains in my back and stomach started, they blended so imperceptibly with the other things I was feeling, staring at the ceiling, lying on the bed. Then I lay down on the floor, on the rug of swans' heads and necks, hurting so much I imagined I felt them moving under me, nudging me with their bills. I waited and waited there for Matthew to come back, but he didn't come back. It must have been a couple of days later that I called a cab to take me to the hospital.

The baby was tiny. She was born feet first, the wrong way. They gave me a drug that put me in a twilight sleep, that turned everything pink until I saw her after she was born. She came out curled like a snail and stayed calm in her crib sleeping all the time. She fit over my shoulder like a chrysalis, a tight little cocoon.

It was Matthew's father and mother who came to see me at the hospital and who took me home. I wanted to go back to our apartment, but they wouldn't let me, they said Matthew wasn't there and I needed somebody to take care of me. They took me to the house in the suburbs, but Matthew wasn't

there, either. He had taken too many drugs and hurt himself, they had to send him away somewhere, they wouldn't say where. His mother gave me the Bible to read.

He came to see me once, I was still lying down most of the time. He came and sat down beside near the big swimming pool. He had seen the baby. "She wasn't like the moon," he whispered, or did I dream that? He sat down on a chair next to me in the sun for a little while and he cried.

He got up and started walking toward the house, muttering something.

"Matthew, I know you didn't mean to hurt me," I said, but he kept walking, shaking his head.

"He didn't even recognize you," his mother told me later, glaring at my face in the sunlight.

"Then why did he cry?" I asked. "If he didn't recognize me then why did he cry?" Words from her Bible swam in my head, he whom my soul loveth. We could do anything, be anything, with what we had. Hadn't he always told me that?

I rushed into the house, hoping I could still find Matthew, but he was gone. I took the keys to his mother's car off the kitchen table and ran to the garage, before she had a chance to stop me.

Then I went out to look for Matthew. I looked everywhere nearby, up and down the streets, and when I couldn't find him I drove back to our old neighborhood. I parked in front of the old apartment and went upstairs and knocked and knocked on the door but no one answered. I tried my key but it wouldn't fit into the lock. I pushed at the lock until the key had scratched my fingers and made them bleed. Then I sat down by the door on the floor in the hallway and remembered how there had been heaven in that apartment, time had stood still. No matter what he did, Matthew knew. We had made love all night, in the light of the streetlight and the Grimm's Hardware sign. If I put my cheek to the wood I could feel the vibrations of those nights, still singing in the floorboards of the apartment.

Mal came to the house in the suburbs after I called him. He cried when he saw me and I saw how his cheeks were now cross-

hatched with tiny red veins. Matthew's mother wanted to keep the baby for herself, but Mal wouldn't let her. He took me, and the baby, and brought us to this beautiful house where we have been so happy. It is not far from the ocean and we go sailing a couple of times a month if the wind is not blowing too hard. I am thin again and Mal has bought me wonderful new clothes. The little girl calls him Daddy and has never known another father.

I thought Mal would ask me to explain a lot of things, but mostly he hasn't.

"I know you've never loved anybody but me," he said. "I knew you'd come back. That's why I waited." That was four years ago. And more and more I think Mal was right.

Once we were sitting under the trellis and Mal asked me what I was thinking about when I looked so preoccupied and far away. I told him an apparition gripped my mind sometimes.

"It's a picture of man who looked like a boy and a girl at the same time, a man with hair like a sheaf of golden wires, with eyes as black and shiny as lava chips. You remember, it was a man who confused me, a man who studied the memory and even tried to look into his own head. I must be making it up, don't you think? For no real person could be anything like that."

Mal was annoyed, he said it was certainly something I had made up. I'd made a mistake and had altered the memory to turn it into something more compelling, so I didn't seem like quite such a fool. It was basic psychological theory, he said.

That was a long time ago. I am content with my life and light of heart. I know how evening rises up in the blue noon and I know every moment by the angle and quality of the sunlight spreading on my lawn and on my courtyard. I stand in the courtyard and watch the days and walk through my garden and wait for my daughter and Mal. For surely, as Mal tells me, I am the happiest of women. But it is always summer here and sometimes I remember how the winter was in Minnesota, how dark and drear. And it is just occasionally, as I watch Phoebe's copper hair growing into tighter and tighter curls with each passing year, that my mind strays back to that dead and gloomy time.

Damariscotta Mills: Jean and Cal Eileen Simpson

Eileen Simpson, who married the poet John Berryman in 1942, was a first-hand witness of the antics, enthusiasms, rivalries and brilliant conversation of the most gifted group of American poets since the generation of Pound and Eliot—a group which included Berryman, Randall Jarrell, Robert Lowell, Delmore Schwartz and others. Poets in Their Youth, her memoir of the years of her marriage to Berryman, from whom she was divorced in 1956, will be published by Random House this spring. The following description of a summer visit which the Berrymans made to Robert Lowell and his wife at the time, Jean Stafford, at their home in Maine, is taken from a chapter in Miss Simpson's book.

The village of Damariscotta Mills looked as though it had been scrubbed and polished, so bright was the light, so transparent the air, on the July afternoon when a taxi left us at a white clapboard house with green shutters, the home of Jean Stafford and Robert Lowell. Though we were not late, Cal (as

he was called) greeted us as if he had been impatient for our arrival. Jean was down at the general store shopping, he said. He would take us up to our room. Our suitcases, heavy with books rather than clothing, he picked up as if they were no burden, and with an appealing gawkiness, loped up the stairs two at a time, his shirttail hanging out in back, his shoes loosely tied, his hair tousled. He was taller than I had remembered, with a sturdy back and strong arms.

We had met only twice before, briefly at a *Nation* party and before that in Princeton when the Lowells had come down to see their old friend the novelist Caroline Gordon (Tate) who had arranged for us to have lunch together. At the Peacock Inn only Caroline had been at ease. The poets, who already knew and admired each other's work, were diffident, Cal scowling and whispering, John holding his head as if his neck was in traction. Jean and I were only a little less wooden.

In the two years since then, Jean's novel *Boston Adventure* had been published, had been a critical success and a best seller long enough to allow her to buy the Maine house. The luxury of owning a house, her first, could best be enjoyed by sharing it with friends, for which the previous months of snow, isolation and hard work—Jean finishing *The Mountain Lion*, Cal making the final revisions on *Lord Weary's Castle*—had made them eager. John and I were the first of the summer "influx of poets" and their wives to occupy the pretty guest room at the front of the house, one of the windows of which looked onto the quiet street, the other across a meadow to an imposing mansion.

After we unpacked we joined Cal in the living room. If from the back he had looked like an untidy prep-school athlete, slouched in a chair he appeared slighter and almost delicate, partly because of the contrast between his pale complexion and his dark, tightly curled hair. I was surprised at how handsome he was now that he wasn't frowning. Without eyeglasses (which he had replaced with contact lenses) he had the look of a choirboy: "Oh, there's a terrifying innocence in my face." The impression of innocence vanished in the coming days as the wily poet came out of hiding. Thereafter his good looks seemed

more like those of a movie actor or, as John put it, a "matinée idol."

Cal's reputation as a poet was confined to the readers of literary magazines interested enough in his work to have sought out a copy of the limited edition the Cummington Press (a small private house) had published of his slim book of verse, *Land of Unlikeness*, as well as to the high opinion of his mentors, notably John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate. The years of association with these two Southerners, and with classmates at Kenyon College, explained why it was that this Boston Brahmin spoke with a Southern accent.

What he was saying in his soft voice was that the mansion I had seen from the upstairs window was called "Kavanagh." It had been built by an Irishman, James Kavanagh, who had settled in Maine in about 1800 and had made his fortune from lumber mills and shipyards. Since Jean had not yet returned, and there was time before dinner, if we liked he would show us around the town.

What I remember best about Damariscotta Mills is the sight and sound of water. The village was much like others in Maine that had not yet been discovered by tourists. There were no shops or antique stores, only a post office, a depot and an old-fashioned general store. What made it unique was the sound of its industry, the very agreeable noise of the rushing water that furnished power for its mills. Cal showed us the mills and mill-pond, the river-fed Great Salt Bay that ran seventeen miles to the Atlantic, and Damariscotta Lake. From the lake one saw the rear elevation and octagonal cupola of "Kavanagh." It was in the Federal style and a beauty. Though it looked empty, Cal said it was inhabited by a descendant of the original family, and that in the morning I might catch a glimpse of the owner sitting on the front lawn in her high-backed and hooded wicker chair.

Dinner was almost ready when we got back. It was time for a drink. In those days it was either rum, the only hard liquor available because of the war, or an inexpensive domestic sherry. In his courteous, even formal way, Cal asked, "Can I offer you a Cuba libre, to celebrate your arrival?"



*This page: John Berryman, Jean
Stafford and Robert Lowell at
Damariscotta Mills
Opposite page left: Robert Lowell
and Eileen Simpson
Opposite page right: John Berryman*

At dinner, as she talked, I remembered Delmore Schwartz having told us that Jean had been very pretty before the accident. (He hadn't known her then, but had heard it from others who had.) Shortly before Christmas, in 1937, she and Cal had gone on a date to the Crawford House, a night club in downtown Boston. On the way home Cal, who was driving, had careened into a stanchion. When Jean regained consciousness she was in a hospital, her face swathed in bandages. A surgeon built her a workable nose, but there was no disguising that it had been badly broken. And one could see signs, as she wrote of Pansy Vanneman in her story "The Interior Castle," that her face had been "darned."

Had I not been told of the accident I would not have guessed that her face had been so badly damaged. Nine healing years had passed since then. Besides, it was her eyes, rather than her nose, or the darns, that struck me. They seemed to be bathed in an excess of fluid, so that they looked permanently welled-up, giving the impression that she had been crying or might do so at any moment. It may have been this, as well as her expression in repose, that made her look sad. The sadness vanished as she talked, when, depending on what she was saying, she looked sly, shrewd, or mischievous, as she twisted her mouth and blew



out her cheeks with suppressed glee at the wickedly funny things she said.

At dinner she entertained us with stories about the neighbors, an Episcopalian nun and a bishop's widow, who lived across the street and frequently invited her to tea. Since they were like characters out of Trollope, or were on their way to being characters in a Stafford novel, they should have interested her, but she found that when she was with them she had a powerful thirst for a beverage stronger than the one they offered. She was more comfortable with the sheriff, who also owned the local taxi, the one she hired when she wanted to go to Bath. Bath, the nearest city, had an importance for her which we were not to understand until later.

"I have the voice of an undertaker," Jean said. "Don't you agree?" It's true that it was low and came from deep in her throat. As a storyteller she was as masterly at pacing and timing as a professional comedian, holding onto and letting go of words to squeeze the maximum effect from them, gesturing as she talked with a large capable-looking hand, palm side up, which she bounced gently as if she were hefting a small flat stone such as one might scale over water. Her conversation was studded with sassy expressions children used to use, and which

she continued to use in her stories. Disbelieving what someone said, for example, she'd counter with a disdainful, "In a pig's valise." She weighted the phrase to make it sound as if she'd run through all the animals in the ark, and their valises—the giraffe's, the snake's, the parrot's—before settling on the pig's as the one that would best carry her meaning. And when she said "It's none of your beeswax" in answer to what she thought was a nosy question from Cal, she put on an expression as rude and anarchistic as Lotty Gump's in "Bad Characters."

John, whose speech had been as formal as his poetry and his style of dressing when I first met him, had been dismayed by my slangy way of talking. To please him, I modified my language—up to a point. When he was being difficult, or when I wanted him to pay attention to something I was saying, I reverted to pungent college idioms and phrases from the twenties and thirties (quite different from Randall's) that my friends and I had sprinkled through our conversation in the mistaken notion that they made us sound worldly. After a while John began to use them himself, in italics. Later he not only removed the italics, he took over the phrases. "No kidding!" "And how!" "That's the ticket!" "You can say *that* again!" began to sound characteristically his. Jean's way of talking, her cheeky expressions (which he had not heard when growing up) delighted him.

That first evening we stayed up late, talking and smoking. Only when we'd run out of cigarettes were we willing to go to bed. In our room, John spun me around and said, "Aren't they *delicious*? Aren't you glad we came?" He was elated that the evening had gone so well, especially because I had had second thoughts about how four comparative strangers would get on over a long weekend. And Delmore had hinted darkly—at what? I wondered as I fell asleep.

The next morning in the large sunny kitchen ell that had been added onto the old house, we continued the conversation where we had left off the previous evening. On the way up to bed I had noticed that Jean was setting the table for breakfast and asked if I could help her. Somewhat embarrassed, she said it was an old boardinghouse habit she couldn't break. Her

father, a writer of Westerns under the nom de plume of Jack Wonder and Ben Delight. . .

"Jack Wonder. Ben Delight. What marvelous names for a writer!" John said.

"Certainly livelier than John Allyn McAlpin Berryman," Cal said, teasing John about the way he had signed his early poems.

"Or Robert Traill Spence Lowell the Fourth," John teased back.

"How about *The Transmogrified Calf* for a book title?" Jean asked. Books with such titles had earned her father so little money that he hadn't been able to support a wife and four children. Boulder, Colorado—where they lived—being a college town, her mother had opened a boardinghouse. Jean, the youngest of four, loathed cleaning for and serving others, and had resented her family's poverty. While at the University of Colorado, where she earned extra money posing for life classes, she made up her mind to "light out" for the East.

"How old had she been when she knew she wanted to be a novelist?" John asked.

"I knew it from the time I could read, although I began, age six, as a poet. Want to hear my first poem? It's called 'Gravel.' I've just given it to my character Molly in *The Mountain Lion*. In a gravelly voice, Jean recited:

Gravel, gravel on the ground
Lying there so safe and sound,
Why is it you look so dead?
Is it because you have no head?

"From a six-year-old, it shows promise, don't you think?" Cal asked John.

"More than the science fiction novel I wrote when I was twelve and thought was, as Eileen would say, 'hot stuff.' "

Her escape from Boulder had been made possible by a graduate fellowship to study philosophy at Heidelberg. After she returned to the United States, she had taught at Stephens College. When I asked her how she liked teaching, she made a face like a gargoyle and drawled, "I'd as lief go to hell in a hand

basket." Teaching interfered with writing. She had a novel underway when she left Stephens and went back to Boulder to attend a summer writing school. At the school she met Ford Madox Ford.

"Ford was very important in our lives," Cal said. "He introduced Jean and me. It was also he who introduced me to the Tates."

Cal had come under Allen Tate's influence at a crucial moment in his life. As early as his prep school days at St. Mark's (where, because of his scruffy habits and rebellious pronouncements, he'd been nicknamed Cal, after the monstrous Roman emperor Caligula), he'd known he wanted to be a poet.

"At South Kent, the terror of any boy who was bookish and didn't go out for sports, was that he'd be called 'she.' You can bet I didn't read and I played football," John said. "You obviously didn't mind your nickname."

"It was certainly better than being called 'Bobby,' my name at home. And I must confess that I wanted to be on the football team as much as I wanted to write poetry."

"So did I. Or at least my mother convinced me that I did. Crew, I finally discovered, was my sport. Myopia no problem there."

Harvard was no more congenial than St. Mark's had been to Cal. Home was less congenial than either. Cal had wanted to get away from home and escape from the kind of life his parents led.

"Cal's mother put on white gloves every morning and ran her fingers over the mantle and table tops to see if the maids had dusted properly," Jean said, puffing out her cheeks. "For cocktail parties she hired 'accommodators' who passed the hors d'oeuvres and served the drinks. As a signal from her that the party had gone on long enough, the accommodators swooped down to remove all the glasses (I kept a firm grip on mine) and flicked the lights off and on, to announce that it was time for the guests to go home."

Beneath this ridicule of Mrs. Lowell's domestic practices one felt that the Boston life Cal had wanted to escape was exactly the kind of life Jean, in Boulder, had dreamed of moving into.

She didn't object to the listing:

Lowell, Mr & Mrs Rob't T S Jr
(Jean Stafford) H' 39
Ken' 40

in the Boston *Social Register*, which she kept on her desk next to Fowler's *English Usage* and the Merck *Manual*.

Cal's announcement to his parents that he was planning to leave college to marry Anne Dick, a girl some years his senior, had provoked a violent dispute with his parents, in the course of which he struck his father:

I knocked my father down. He sat on the carpet—
my mother calling from the top of the carpeted stairs,
their glass door locking behind me, no cover. . .

The Lowells, who had become increasingly worried about their son, were now convinced he was crazy and should be locked up. Dr. Merrill Moore, a sonneteer/psychiatrist and friend of the family's, persuaded them that it would be more therapeutic to allow Cal to go South in the company of Ford Madox Ford to visit the Tates.

The hospitable Tates, whose Tennessee house "Benfolly" was already crammed with family and friends, told Cal that if he wanted to stay more than a few days he'd have to pitch a tent, never for a moment dreaming that he would do just that. He camped on their lawn not for days or weeks, but for months.

"It was a wonder I ever got any writing done in those days," Caroline Tate said, reminiscing to me years later. "What I spent my time doing was feeding poets."

In the fall, Cal transferred to Kenyon College, to study under Ransom and, informally, with Randall Jarrell (who was three years his senior). Near the end of his time at Kenyon he went to Boulder with Ford and there met Jean.

"Cal's parents were no happier about me than they had been about Anne Dick," Jean said. "Mrs. Lowell, introducing me to her Beacon Hill friends, would say, 'Tell us, Jean dear, where *is* it you come from?' Rolling the word around in my throat, and using my undertaker voice, I'd say, 'Colorado,' at

which the assembled guests would turn to each other and murmur—as if I'd said I was from the upper reaches of the Orinoco!"

That she was also the girl who had been with Cal in the automobile accident didn't endear her to her future mother-in-law. Although Jean must have suffered greatly as a result of the smash-up, she talked about it with clinical detachment, as if what was of interest were the medical details. Or she made a joke of the lawsuit she had brought against the Lowells' insurance company. "I sued for twenty-five thousand and got a measly four thousand. The lawyers forbade us to meet until the case was settled. The prohibition gave a certain piquancy to our clandestine rendezvous; we saw each other more than ever."

After Jean had recovered and was back in Colorado, she received a telegram from Cal, who was then at Louisiana State University. It read, "Have job. Come at once."

"What I didn't understand. . ."

Cal interrupted, shouting, "Calumny! Here comes the black tongue!"

" . . . was that the job he had was for *me*—to be secretary in the office of the *Southern Review*." With her salary, and Cal's small income, they were able to marry while he was in graduate school.

The following year, when they moved to New York, they both had jobs at the Catholic publishing house Sheed and Ward. "Once," Jean said, "when the Sheeds invited us to the country for the weekend, I packed a typewriter case, the only thing we had which could pass for luggage, with two pairs of pajamas, unironed, and two toothbrushes. As our taxi pulled into the driveway, the butler came down the stairs, opened the door and before I could stop him, whisked away the typewriter case. After being greeted by the Sheeds, we were shown to our room. There was the typewriter case, open on the luggage rack. The toothbrushes were in a glass in the bathroom. The two pairs of unironed pajamas were neatly arranged, one on either side of the bed. Cal thought it was a scream. You can imagine, Eileen, how I felt—*unironed*."

The Bears were born the following year. They were a family

of imaginary animals whose exploits Jean and Cal invented and told each other about. They had come into being when the Lowells lived with the Tates in Tennessee in a remarkably productive household—Caroline writing *The Women on the Porch*, Jean, *Boston Adventure*, Cal, *Land of Unlikeness* and Allen, *Jefferson Davis*. Since the Tates had not yet been converted, the Lowells went to Mass alone. To get to the church required a trip by bus, a long wait, and another bus. The Bears helped them pass the travel time. John and I never heard a full episode (the Bears were very private), but there were many references to their activities, past and present. One very important Bear wore contact lenses. Another, female, had a black tongue.

Throughout the weekend literary talk ran in counterpoint to autobiography. Not since Delmore had John found a contemporary who was as obsessed with poetry as he was, and who felt that next to the greatest joy of all—the “tortured joy” of writing poems—was the joy of discussing them. Cal, like Delmore and John, believed that in heaven, or paradise, or “the chambers of the end” (as John later called it), poets would spend eternity in one another’s company, exclaiming, explicating, parsing, doing what Cal and John were doing now—talking about poetry. They began with their own generation: Schwartz, Jarrell, Dylan Thomas, Ted Roethke, Elizabeth Bishop, Karl Shapiro. Each had his favorites, and urged them on the other. Randall was Cal’s; Delmore, John’s. They worked backward to their mentors: Tate, Ransom, Van Doren, Blackmur, Hart Crane. Tate’s influence on both of them was immense. John had been his student in a summer school course at Columbia and had had “the top of my head blown off” by Allen’s brilliance and erudition. The summer after John returned from England he stayed with the Tates in Connecticut, showed Allen what he had been working on, and decided that there was no better reader, no one from whom he could learn more about composition.

Having anthologies by heart, John and Cal had no need for books as they moved abroad to Spender, MacNeice, Auden. John, who had met Auden in his tutor’s rooms at Cambridge,

and again at a New Year's Eve party in London at which Hedli Anderson (MacNeice) sang Britten's setting of Auden's "O tell me the truth about love," which John, in falsetto, sang a stanza of for us, told the story of having gone from Detroit to Ann Arbor to hear the English poet lecture. "It was one of his first public appearances in the United States. The hall was filled to capacity: Auden fans in a high state of excitement. Wystan (as of course I didn't call him) appeared, looking as disheveled as an unmade bed, draped his great height over the lectern, rested one foot on top of the other and began to talk. In a few minutes it was clear to the fans that they were going to understand little that he said in his high-pitched, nasal voice, apart from an occasional name like Mann and Kafka, which he pronounced in an Audenesque way, with an exaggeratedly flat 'a,' and a few unimportant words like 'actually,' pronounced 'icktually.' There were those who wondered if he was speaking Icelandic."

When they reached the giants of the twentieth century—Yeats, Eliot, Pound—Cal, knowing that John had been even more powerfully influenced by Yeats than by Auden, asked him if he had ever met the master.

"You can imagine I was mad to see him." While at Cambridge John had summoned the courage to write Yeats. Receiving a letter in reply, he set off on a pilgrimage to Ireland. "I arrived in Dublin to find he *wasn't there!* He'd gone to London."

"You'd written you were coming?"

"Never occurred to me. I was so concerned with my own arrangements that I hadn't given a thought to what Willie might be up to. I imagined that all I had to do was go to his house and knock on the door. After a few days of paralysis, during which I couldn't think what to do, I recovered sufficiently to enjoy Dublin. I went to the Abbey Theatre one night, went backstage, commented, offered suggestions (the modesty of the young!). The troupe took me under its wing, showed me around, introduced me to Yeats's daughter, Anne, at the Cuala Press." To Cal, John said, "Did you ever fancy yourself in love with Anne?"

"Didn't every young poet?"

“Having imagined her as a dazzling beauty, I saw myself as Yeats’ son-in-law. I was crushed to find she was quite plain.”

On his return to Cambridge John took the trouble to do what he should have done before setting out for Ireland. He wrote Yeats, asking for an appointment and received an invitation to tea at the Athenaeum. Dylan Thomas, whom John was seeing a good deal of at the time had

Scorn bottomless for elders: we were twenty-three
but Yeats I worshipped: he was amused by this,
all day the day set for my tea with the Great Man
he plotted to turn me up drunk.

“Dylan had this idea that all serious poets should be serious drinkers. He found my Cantabrigian sherry-sipping ‘effete.’ ”

The meeting had gone, John said in answer to Cal’s question, the way meetings with famous men usually go. John had looked forward to it for so long, and had expected such oracular pronouncements, that disappointment was inevitable. It was Yeats the Public Man, the Senator, he’d seen, the mask clamped on so tightly there was no getting behind it.

“How did he look? What was he wearing?” Jean, the novelist, wanted the specifications.

“Impressive. Very. Surprisingly tall, carefully dressed in well-cut tweeds, wearing a bow tie.”

(Ah! I thought. So that’s where John’s habit of wearing bow ties came from. I hadn’t known before.)

“The flowing white hair looked even whiter against his dark skin. He was very dark. Not at all Anglo-Irish in complexion. I wondered if he had a touch of jaundice.”

What did they talk about?

“Poetry, of course. But not *enough* about poetry. Yeats got off on [Oliver St. John] Gogarty, his friend and fellow-Dubliner [Joyce’s erstwhile friend, the Buck Mulligan of *Ulysses*]. He urged me to read Gogarty’s memoir, *As I Walked Down Sackville Street*. I rushed out to buy it as soon as the audience was over, read it at once and found it to be of no interest *whatever*.”

“What do you think are Yeats’s greatest poems?” Cal

asked.

"Out of the early work, 'The Folly of Being Comforted' and 'That the Night Come.' The supreme achievement, in *The Wild Swans at Coole*, is the title poem, together with 'Major Robert Gregory' and 'A Deep-Sworn Vow.' That's what I believe at the moment. It changes of course."

"What are his three greatest lines?"

"Greatest lines? Must we select?" John fought this narrowness.

"Cal gets that from Randall," Jean said, not quite *sotto voce* and looking as if she'd swallowed her tongue. "Randall has a passion for The Three Greatest. Cal's caught it."

Cal, scowling with concentration, looking again like the man we'd met in Princeton, wouldn't be deflected: they must find the three greatest lines.

John said, "I'll give you six instead:

Unwearied still, lover by lover,
They paddle in the cold
Companionable streams or climb the air;
Their hearts have not grown old;
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,
Attend upon them still.

The giants of the twentieth century were taking so much time that the poets clearly would not finish with them, despite the single-minded and nonstop talk, by the time the weekend was over. One necessary interruption was Sunday Mass. John the Apostate stayed home while I went with Cal, in a proper suit, hair brushed and shoelaces tied (at Jean's prompting) and Jean, hatted, with missal in hand, to St. Patrick's, a pretty country church designed by Nicholas Codd, the architect of Kavanagh, with a bell said to have been made by Paul Revere.

For me it was an unusual and agreeable experience to be accompanied to Mass. John and I didn't know any Catholics, and many of our friends were openly antagonistic to religion. John was not. Although he was unable to believe, it was very important to him that I should. As I admitted to him, I was a little in awe of converts, for they had chosen a discipline I so

often rebelled against. And, having been instructed as adults, they were far more knowledgeable about theology and ritual than I.

On the way to Mass Jean said that, looking for an antidote to her mother's Scotch Presbyterianism, she had received instruction and joined the Church while in college. What she didn't say, but what I felt, was that she had been growing cool toward Catholicism and might have been on the point of giving it up had it not been for Cal's conversion at the time of their marriage. Privately she told me that Cal was a puritan at heart. He had become increasingly and rigidly devout, focusing on the things in the Church she found least attractive: spiritual exercises, retreats, good works. And what was "maddening and enervating" was that he insisted she follow him in them.

My having been what Caroline Gordon called a "cradle Catholic" interested them as much as their conversions interested me. Even more, they were intrigued, as Delmore had been, by my having been an orphan. I thought at first that Jean's questions about my childhood came from a novelist's avidity for details. Then I realized that she felt I had lived out one of her childhood fantasies. She had wanted desperately to be an orphan. If she bristled when Mrs. Lowell pointed out that she came from a barbarous section of the country, and from parents "one hadn't heard of," Jean also cringed because her own judgment coincided with her mother-in-law's. If she wasn't a Mexican like Rose Fabrizio in *The Bleeding Heart*, or a "rube" like Emma in *Children are Bored on Sunday*, or the child of foreigners (the mother a domestic) like Sonia in *Boston Adventure*, she felt that she was. Sonia longs to be adopted by Miss Pride, Rose by the cultivated and fatherly looking gentlemen she sees in the library. I hadn't been adopted, but as Jean saw it my orphanhood had given me an enviable freedom. What happens to those who free themselves from parents and choose substitutes is a theme she treated with irony in her fiction.

Cal, too, had wished for the freedom to choose his parents. He had left home and camped on the property of the parents he would like to have had, Caroline and Allen, returning to them

with Jean after marrying. (Allen was not pleased when he heard that Cal referred to him as "Father Tate.") Anne in *The Mills of the Kavanagh's* is an orphan who is adopted by Harry Kavanaugh's mother. Randall Jarrell, reviewing the book, said of the poem, "Yes, Robert Lowell would act like this [like Anne] if he were a girl. . . but whoever saw a girl like Robert Lowell?"

After Mass Jean repeated what she had said the previous evening: John and I mustn't think of leaving as originally planned. We *must* stay, Cal said. How could John even consider going when they hadn't discussed "Lycidas"?

It didn't take much coaxing. We were having such a good time we were dying to stay. And we felt they were pleading with us not only because they, too, were enjoying our company; it was also because they wanted not to be alone—although why we couldn't have said.

My concern was over the labor it would be for Jean. She was a conscientious hostess and a housekeeper so meticulous that her mother-in-law's glove would have been spotless after an inspection of her rooms. She loved the furniture she had carefully selected, the vases she kept filled with flowers, the painting of Chartres by Biala (Ford Madox Ford's wife), all of them bought with *Boston Adventure* money. Sometimes when the poets were talking about Hopkins, or Keats, or Wordsworth, she'd take an oiled chamois out of the drawer of a small commode next to her chair and caress its highly polished surface. With little fuss she conjured up three meals a day from the limited stocks of the general store, rows of S.S. Pierce cans from her pantry shelves, vegetables from local gardens, and insisted on doing it all herself. For such a hostess two guests meant a good deal of work. We agreed to delay our departure for Cape Cod on condition that Jean allow me to help with the preparation of meals. John and Cal, or Cal and I, would take turns doing the dishes.

Once it was settled, Jean worried that we might run out of "hootch." The bottle of rum opened when we arrived was almost empty. Cal said we could do without liquor; John and I drank little and he wasn't drinking at all. "Maybe *you* can do

without it," Jean said, "but it gives me the wimwams to be in a house that's bone-dry." The next morning when I asked the neighbors' permission to telephone to the Cape, Jean called her friend the sheriff and arranged to be taken to Bath. In Maine, liquor was sold at state stores. The closest one was in Bath.

The days of our visit, which stretched from a weekend to two weeks, fell into a casual order. Although neither Cal nor John was supposedly working, there was never a time when they were not working. After breakfast and a good long recitation:

Bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear,
Compels me to disturb your season due;
For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime,

and explication of "Lycidas," which they had no trouble agreeing was one of the greatest poems in the language (though there was the usual push/pull over the Three Greatest Lines), or another poem that one or the other had come out of sleep thinking about, Cal went up to his room. Sprawled on the bed like a big kid, he read and wrote until noon. At a small desk in the guest room, John sat immobile for long periods, one leg snaked around the other. He pulled on his beardless chin, pushed his glasses back up on the bridge of his nose with his spatulate middle finger, tapped his teeth with his pen preparatory to putting a word on paper.

Jean, whose desk was in the downstairs hall between the kitchen and the parlor (a position I would have thought too exposed until she explained to me that she worked best when she had a view out of as many windows as possible, so that she could keep an eye on the comings and goings of her neighbors), was working on a new novel. Or trying to. She was not unhappy to be interrupted by the postman who often brought her fan mail, which she read avidly and answered immediately. "Listen to this," she'd say, calling to me out on the lawn where, lounging in a canvas deck chair, I was preparing in a desultory way for graduate school, and read me a sentence or paragraph that tickled her fancy.

Periodically Cal, shoeless, appeared at the side of her desk with a draft of a poem for her to type. Draft after draft after draft. This astonished me because I couldn't imagine John asking me to type for him. For one thing he was better at it than I; for another, he never showed Richard, or me, or anyone else, a poem until the penultimate version. Jean claimed that Cal was the world's champion reviser, sometimes with startling results. "A poem which had begun with the title, 'To Jean: On Her Confirmation'"

"Don't listen. She lies. She lies." Cal tried to shout her down.

" . . . finished by being called, 'To a Whore at the Brooklyn Navy Yard.' "

The typing chore Jean seemed to accept as a wifely duty. That Cal was a "mechanical moron," who couldn't play a phonograph, much less type, was only another sign of his massive incompetence in dealing with everyday life. Were it not for her, she said, he would go for days without eating, sleeping or bathing. She would have liked to go to Boston or New York from time to time, but how could she leave Cal to look after himself and the house?

Writing, reciting, reading, studying, talking. Our sedentary life we interrupted in the afternoon for a walk to the mills or a swim in Damariscotta Lake. That is to say, Cal and John and I walked and swam. Jean, who knew the name of every tree, bush, flower and weed, ventured out infrequently, preferring to observe nature through the window. Aquaphobia, which she'd suffered from since childhood, kept her from swimming or boating. She confessed that as a child taking a bath had made her so anxious she had been able to manage only by organizing an elaborate ritual around it (like Molly in *The Mountain Lion*).

At 6:30 or so we'd have a drink on the lawn, weather permitting, as it often did on those lovely long July evenings, followed by dinner, which might consist of ramekins of crab-meat (a specialty of the house) and summertime dishes like corn on the cob and strawberry shortcake. If it was Cal and

John's turn to clean up, Jean and I would hear them reciting to each other—Hopkins, Donne, Marvell, Crashaw, or recent Lowell and Berryman—Cal in his soft Southern voice, John, taut, passionate, with the vestiges of an English accent. At a poem a plate, the work went slowly.

When it was my turn with Cal, we might begin by talking about J.F. Powers, Dorothy Day, Jacques Maritain or Emanuel Chapman (the philosopher my sister had studied with at Hunter College, whose work Cal knew and thought more profound than Maritain's). Often our kitchen duty ended in clowning and hilarity. John, sitting in the other room with Jean, whose somber mood was growing more obvious every day, wondered what could possibly be so funny. After one such session he startled me by asking, with his "mad charm" smile, "You're not falling in love with Cal, are you?" In the five years we had been together this was the first sign he gave of jealousy (at least of a romantic sort; he could be extremely jealous of my sister and especially of her children, though he loved them and was, for the most part, a devoted brother-in-law as well as a highly entertaining uncle). Cal was certainly very attractive, and far more fun than I could have guessed from our pre-Damariscotta meetings. But I couldn't imagine being in love with anyone but John—as I thought he knew. He did, he said. Then why had he asked? Just checking. He had a feeling. . . he wasn't sure . . . he'd tell me later.

Since I never again saw Cal quite so buoyant, and saw him afterward often when his mood had swung dangerously high or low and illness had robbed him of his youthfulness, it's difficult to recapture his light-hearted playfulness at the sink. What was a chore for others was clearly a game for one who wasn't ordinarily called upon to help out. If he washed, there would be soapsuds and water all over, down his trousers and on the floor, as he gestured during one of his imitations—he was a wicked mimic—of Randall or Allen. If I washed, he played the boss of the job, handing me back a pot and saying, "Ah-leen, Ah do believe you could put a little more elbow grease on this." One had the sense that he was enjoying a rare period of equilibrium. That summer, before the publication of *Lord*

Weary's Castle, with the fame he had dreamed of in sight, he was still free of the demands fame brings.

When we joined the others in what Jean called the parlor, and Cal called "the soft room" (the chairs there being more comfortable than those in the dining room), we'd settle down to more talk, this time not about poetry but about people. It was a custom the Lowells had picked up, Cal said, from living with the Tates. After a hard day of writing, they all felt there was nothing so refreshing as gossip. Isolated as they had been in Tennessee, they had provided their own entertainment, delighting in the "amiable venom" with which they went over their friends and acquaintances. Each night, sitting around the fire, a drink in hand, Allen or Caroline would say, "Let's see, who should it be tonight. What about John Berryman?"

John winced. He could imagine the scene clearly, having been with them when they said, "Let's do the Lowells" (which was how he had learned of Cal's fight with his father and much else besides that Cal would have been distressed, though hardly surprised, to know had provided the subject for an evening's entertainment). The summer John stayed with the Tates in Connecticut, he was so disoriented by his return to America after two years abroad, and so distraught over his relationship with his mother and the separation from B., that he had not been an easy guest. He could well imagine the comedy his behavior could make in the Tates' retelling.

In any case John was not completely comfortable with gossip. His position stood midway between Randall's and Cal's. While he enjoyed it if it was about people he didn't know or didn't like, he was very protective of his friends. He was passionately loyal toward them, and wanted them to like one another as much as he liked each of them (and was crushed that they seldom did). He wished that Cal and Delmore admired each other as much as he admired both, and was saddened that there had been a rift between them. John was only willing to discuss Delmore up to a point in the evening gossip sessions. He didn't say that we had noticed Delmore was drinking too much when we had stayed with him in Cambridge (Delmore, who only four years earlier had told us Jews didn't drink). Nor did he say that

there had been an obvious deterioration in the way Delmore was living, and that he seemed increasingly suspicious of the motives of others. Though John roared with laughter—one couldn't have resisted—at Cal's imitation of a Blackmurian monologue on the subject of blueberry bogs, in which the bogs were treated as seriously and analytically as Henry James might have been, he would not have considered gossiping about our visit with the Blackmurs, whom we had seen earlier that summer.

When Jean began to question him about the Blackmurs' marriage, saying she'd heard a good deal of gossip about how badly they got on, he changed the subject: What writers had been at Yaddo when she was there? "The star," Jean said with heavy irony, "was Carson McCullers." One knew from the way she pronounced the name that the author of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* would furnish us with more than one evening's entertainment in the parlor.

Philip Rahv, the *Partisan Review* editor, a Marxist and literary essayist (who was one of the critics responsible for the Henry James revival), had with his wife Natalie rented a house not far away from Damariscotta Mills. One evening, by way of diversion, the sheriff came over in his old Buick to drive us to their place. En route Jean warned us about the Rahvs' cat. Jean also had a cat whose intelligence and grace she boasted of in the way a fond parent boasts of a child. It was very much her cat, but occasionally Cal picked it up and played with it, imitating the way Caroline Gordon talked to her dachshund. Instead of talking to the dog, as most dog owners do, Caroline amused herself by pretending that the dog talked to her. It called her "Mama," and commented trenchantly on their house guests, especially visiting poets.

Hart Crane was memorialized in a Gordon/dachshund dialogue. In 1925, when the Tates were living in Patterson, New York, and were very broke, they had taken in the even more impoverished Crane. As the winter wore on, there were many disagreements between them. (During periods when they weren't speaking, they communicated by slipping notes

under each other's doors.) On one occasion, when Caroline reproved Crane for being inconsiderate, he made the mistake of defending himself by saying he was "nervous and sensitive," and shouldn't be held to the standards of behavior demanded of others. Afterward, Caroline would hold her dachshund up in the air, as Cal now held Jean's cat, and have it say to her, "I'm nervous and sensitive, aren't I, Mama? Like my Uncle Hart Crane." The nervous and sensitive young poets who had stayed with the Tates and had learned to fear Caroline's tongue were so relieved that it was Crane and not them whom she mocked in this way that whenever they heard this story they fell into fits of laughter. (Although he sometimes played with Jean's cat, I don't think Cal was interested in animals, except perhaps in birds, but I shocked him one evening when I struck out at a luna moth. Never having seen one before, I was frightened and sought, reflexively, to protect myself. Cal explained what it was and said I musn't kill it. Jean later told me that he had remonstrated with her for setting traps for the mice whose gnawing behind their bedroom wall had kept her awake on winter nights. "Why not let them live?" he'd said, "there's food enough for all of us." "This, mind you, from a violent man!" Jean added.)

The Rahvs' cat, according to Jean, was scary. It was likely to reach through one of their lattice-back chairs with a prehensile paw and grab at one's arm. Also, she suspected it was a snoop and a spy. It eavesdropped on the conversation, and, like Saki's Tobermory, slunk off to its room to record what had been said. Certainly the cat, if it was listening, got an earful of literary gossip that night. I was on my guard against being grabbed (the cat *did* look dangerous) and was less attentive to the conversation than usual. When Natalie saw my uneasiness, she took her pet in her lap and stroked it, which led Philip, in his rich Lithuanian accent, to expound a theory he had: a woman who says she wants a child would, if she understood herself better, realize that what she really wanted was a cat.

"A *cat*? It certainly wasn't what I wanted."

"Think how much suffering in the world such self-knowledge would save!" Philip went on, better and better

pleased with his theory.

Surprised at finding himself in a "roomful of Catholics" instead of Marxists, Philip questioned Jean closely about the religious ladies of Damariscotta Mills, whose activities he seemed to feel must be a cover for an underground life Jean had not yet discovered. Hooding her eyes and adopting Philip's conspiratorial tone, she reported him as having said, when he spotted Sister Geraldine walking on the street outside her house, "Look! Look! There goes Sister in her nun's clothes," as if he'd caught the nun in one of her disguises.

A few years later at a New Year's Eve party at Nancy and Dwight Macdonald's, Philip recalled our evening together in Maine, and asked me what I thought of the recent conversion of the Tates and of the Lowells' defection from the church. As we sat side by side on a couch, Philip gave me a friendly nudge in the ribs and asked, "Do you write?" I said I did not. "Then I don't get it. I see why they become Catholics. They're looking for new metaphors. But what do you get out of it?" I'm afraid my speechlessness made Philip put me down as what he would have called "a dumb broad."

Either the night of our visit to the Rahvs', or soon thereafter, Jean and John stayed up talking, and were still up when Cal and I came down to breakfast. We had become increasingly aware that Jean was suffering from insomnia, aware also that she made more frequent trips to Bath than were necessary to supply John and me with a predinner cocktail. Cal's discreet attempts to control her drinking had led her to stow a glass of sherry behind the cookbooks in the kitchen, and to keep a hidden supply so that the house would never be "bone-dry." She made a joke to John and me about the capacious shoulder strap pocketbook she bought in which she could hide a flask, so that when she visited the religious ladies she could duck into the bathroom and have a nip.

Her appearance, too, gave her mood away. She wore the same hound's-tooth checked slacks and baggy black sweater every day, disguising her model's figure as effectively as if she were wearing a habit. She let her ash-blond hair hang limp, or covered it with a pointed hat that Lolly Gump might have

fancied. What vanity Jean had was for her house.

Delmore, the intriguer, had hinted—yes, now I put it together—that she was interested in another man (himself perhaps?). He had even insinuated this to Cal, whereupon Cal had socked him. The fistfight that ensued brought the Ellery Street winter to a dramatic close, and explained the coolness between the two men.

If Jean had been in love with another man that winter, by summer it was her house that had become the object of her affection. And yet the house, which for so many years had been a dream, had become a subject for nightmares. The idyll of a long, silent spring in the country, with uninterrupted days for writing, had made her feel locked in and isolated as spring delayed and snow continued to fall. She and Cal had been too much alone.

We thought at first that Jean was suffering from the letdown writers feel on finishing a book. She told John the night they sat up together that although there was a letdown, as well as the usual anxiety that accompanies the publication of a second

Robert Lowell, possibly at Kenyon College



Courtesy of Robert Giroux

novel after the first has been a success, what was even more disturbing was that she was having trouble with the third novel. The new book had to do with the period when she was in college. She and another girl, as rich as Jean was poor, had been in love with the same man. What was to be the central episode in the novel was the suicide of the other girl. Since these events had occurred ten years earlier, Jean had thought she was far enough removed from them to be able to treat them fictionally. She was not. Writing the novel had revived painful memories and guilt. She felt she had been responsible for the suicide.

John, who later sang out his feelings about his father's suicide and his own guilt for any reader of his poetry to hear, was no more willing to talk about his family than Cal was willing to talk about his terrible quarrel with his father. In that all-night session with Jean, John said nothing about his father's death. Nor did he try to reassure her that she was probably not responsible for her friend's suicide, knowing how useless that would be. Instead he suggested she put the novel aside and work on something else. (Later, she tried many times to continue with the fictional account of the triangle without success, though a section of it appeared as the short story "The Philosophy Lesson.")

To me Jean talked about how difficult it was to live with Cal now that he wasn't drinking. "I fell in love with Caligula and am living with Calvin. He's become a fanatic. During Lent he starved himself. If he could get his hands on one, he'd be wearing a hair shirt. He so exaggerated his drinking habits to his confessor just before Easter that the priest suggested he take the pledge for a year. And he did. For a *year!*"

Neither one of them had fully recovered from the period when Cal had been in jail. He had tried for a commission in both the Navy and Army, and had been rejected because of poor vision. By the time he was called up by the draft in 1943, he had decided he couldn't in conscience serve, as he wrote President Roosevelt and his draft board, because of the Allied bombing of European cities. Made to stand trial after his "manic statement," he was sentenced to serve a year and a day in a federal prison (and was paroled after five months). "I was

married," Jean said, "to a jailbird." She couldn't be funny about it for long. In many ways she felt it had been a more difficult period for her than for Cal. "You won't believe this, but Cal is crazy. That made it easier for him."

Only once, on a day when Jean was in Bath, did Cal talk about the period of his incarceration. It was obvious from his change in manner that the memory of those months was still painful to him. He became again the scowling, whispery-voiced head-hanging Cal we had met in Princeton. What his feelings had been during this period, he didn't say. Instead he talked about his fellow inmates, among them notorious criminals seen at a distance, including:

... the T shirted back
of *Murder Incorporated*'s Czar Lepke,
there piling towels on a rack,

and about those who had attended the evening class he'd taught. (One wondered what they made of his assignments from books like *The Cloud of Unknowing*.) By the time we were doing the dishes again that evening, though, his solemn mood had lifted. It was difficult to believe he was "crazy."

By now, the poets had worked their way through their private anthologies of American and English poetry and were reciting Shakespeare:

... the good days
when we sat by a cold lake in Maine
talking about the *Winter's Tale*
Leontes' jealousy
in Shakespeare's broken syntax.

We had our last walk to the millpond, our last swim in the lake, our last Cuba libre. We had come to know one another more intimately in two weeks than would have been possible in two years of meetings at dinners or parties. We embraced, promising to write from Wellfleet and to meet in New York in September.

Although we did see Jean and Cal in the fall, and for years to

come, the last time we saw them together was as the taxi drove off, and they waved us good-bye. Two months later their marriage had broken up and they were on their way to a bitter divorce. At the close of the summer Cal had fallen in love with a guest who, like Minnie in Jean's story "An Influx of Poets," had made a dramatic arrival on the lake by aquaplane. He had left Jean, left the Church, and was living on his own in a tenement above a kosher butcher on the Lower East Side. (To get to his apartment one had to duck behind a slaughtered sheep that blocked the street entrance.)

Jean was in Payne Whitney, the psychiatric division of New York Hospital. She spent the enforced exercise time walking with other inmates in an enclosed garden she called, her comedic sense not failing her even in illness, "Luna Park." The Bears were dead. The dream house in Damariscotta Mills was up for sale.

Stolen Kiss

Robert Shacochis

On an inside day in November, a smoke and cider day, Burton Glass found a white greasy kiss stamped against the black post of the sunporch he was painting at the shore, off-season in Rehobeth.

It pleased him. Look at that, he said.

He worked facing the sea, which today was friendless, dulled by emptiness and an early winter. He saw only where his brush pointed, where the textures changed. In the cold his hands were dumb animals, struggling and stupid, pushing against their task. He wanted them to be stronger, to remember a better day, remember a woman or a fire. His leather gloves made him feel clumsy so he took them off after the first few strokes.

Behind the DuPont place up the beach the geese on Silver Lake cried: the unmusical chorus, the tock of migrating wings, the splash of the spinning gadwalls and pintails on the restful water. The noise came across the dunes to Burton as if there were no distance between the lake and the porch and it comforted, kept him company.

Burton finished the south post and moved over to the middle one, starting at the base. The darkly stained wood was dry, saturated with salt, rough but not splintering. He pecked at it with his brush, stooping to also take his pipe from where he'd set it on the deck. Too much of the season came through into his lungs as he sucked the cold stem. The ash was dead and bitter. He paused to relight it, gazing out along the strand. The sea was pocked, coarse like steel wool, full of dimension. As he concentrated on the match, a wave rose above the tidal slope, held up by the wind and feathered backward, splitting to the sand. He turned back to the post. Half the way up there was the kiss, circled by a glossy halo of oil that seeped out from the image.

Burton examined the mark. He had not expected such a thing. Tamping the lid back on the bucket of paint, he squatted down on it to meditate, to smoke his rum-flavored blend. He could not readily come up with anything to think about, then recalling it was the kiss that stopped him, Burton dreamed a little about the act of a woman, into August and blood-hot air, skin blistered beyond appeasement but finally soothed by cream and lotion, smeared onto the face, over red cheeks and burnt lips. Little wordless dreams saying nothing, just feelings and fragrances that pushed their blessed way through into the day.

This was not his house. He rarely had talked with the women—mother and daughter—who weekended here, both dark haired, distant bodies he had stared at on the beach, admiring how much they might have given and how much more they could. The husband was a lawyer from New York. As caretaker, Burton received his check, carelessly inscribed, and the checks of many others—lawyers, bankers, businessmen—on the first of each month. The mail had no immediacy for Burton anymore. For the past year he only made bi-weekly visits to the post office—once for the money, and once to collect the letter from his own wife who still lived in the Washington suburbs. She was faithful in her writing. Her letters usually arrived the second week of each month. They were chatty and honest and full of little news. Burton enjoyed reading them.

Maybe it was the fellow's wife, Burton thought, looking again at the kiss. She seemed happier when her husband didn't come down with her and the girl. There was never that forced gaiety about her, never the staged manners; even the clothes she wore were more casual and free when the man wasn't there. Her husband the lawyer must be a man committed to appearance. But Burton could not discount the daughter. The source of the kiss might have indeed been her. He had seen how her breasts and hips had grown in the past two or three years, how the boys had found her out there on the sand, sometimes had heard the faint, wonderful language she used, at night in the dunes, as she marked her discoveries. She shrieked once when his dog surprised them back there; Burton heard a young man's voice bringing the girl back into his arms. It was easy to love these things about people he did not know, but he couldn't look at his own life like that. After thirty-two years in Washington, it was hard to see what was genuine and what was not. You had to decompress after being down into it for so long, the *it* a state of affairs not unlike the cold mud shore around the lake, grey and bitter smelling, an airless trap. He had sat behind his desk all those years knowing he was in the wrong place. The beach became his tonic. To now work with one's hands, to scrape and callous them, to be next to the sea when everyone else had abandoned it, to preside over quiet cottages full of the lives of others—this was good, this made sense, to see and feel what you do.

Burton arose from the bucket, a familiar pain soaking his legs, to stand before the kiss. The lips of the woman or girl had set a perfect print. He touched the surface. It did not smear; the wood had taken it in, would hold the kiss forever in sterile ownership. He leaned out over the rail of the porch to knock the crumb and dust from his pipe.

This was enough for now. Burton wanted something in his belly, a nugget or flame that would warm his blood. He cleaned out the brush so it would be ready for his return, passed through the french doors directly into the master bedroom—her bedroom. Usually he would keep going but he stopped this time to turn up the thermostat. When he finished

the porch he must work in here, replace a closet door. The bed was quilted, the pillows uncased. He saw small things he'd never bothered to notice before: a clean ashtray made from a cockle shell, a blue fountain pen and bottle of pills on the night table, a metallic tube of lipstick on the dresser next to a hand mirror. Why, he did not know, he could not tell himself, he had never done a thing like this, but he slid open the top drawer of the dresser—nothing. He opened another—bobby pins and ribbons, a tortoise shell clasp. In the next one down were sheets, linen, pillow cases, army blankets. The bottom drawer—two sweaters, lemon and pink, a folded nightgown, and a bra, the elastic in its straps warped from many washings, so many doings and undos. Burton picked it up, held it, brought it to his nose to smell—ah, so clean. There was a slow, nervous thrill that came from the silken touch. Before replacing it next to the gown, he held each cup in his palms and imagined the breasts that once filled those crumpled, unshaped spaces.

Taking the stairs down to the first level, he left the house, walking up the beach toward town. The lake was visible between the dunes, the noisy congregations of waterfowl, squadrons circling above, constant arrivals and departures. Not long ago he had a good dog, an Irish setter, and the dog died there in the lake. He didn't want to think about it.

The boardwalk began just past the DuPont place. Burton stepped up on it, into more wind, his high-laced boots booming down on the wood, the wind harmless against his stiff white hair trained since boyhood into three patrician waves that rolled straight back from his crown. His wife once said—it was soon after the war—she said, Burton, when you take off your clothes and stand the way you are now, turned just a bit around from the way you're going, you look so handsome and hard. It's your hair, I think, you have the best head of hair, oh and your nose and the color of your body. How did you get so tan all over? What did you do there in Italy? What was it like? You don't know how much I missed you.

The love between them had lasted a long time, longer than he thought it would. It was still there, although they couldn't

live together anymore. At least they hadn't used each other up to the point where they wanted nothing, where any desire wasn't worth the effort. It seemed to get that way at times—those middle years when they managed their love as if it were an anemic bank account. Now those days were over. Thank God for letting us be apart and at peace with the loneliness.

His eyes watered in the wind, his chest tightened under the woolen Pendleton. Onto Atlantic Avenue, he passed the shuttered guest houses, the pew-like rows of benches that faced back toward the ocean, the statue of angry Neptune, a long bicycler in scarf and stocking cap. Inside the Sportsmen's Tavern, his eyeglasses fogged as he moved instinctively toward the first empty stool at the bar. He took a paper napkin to wipe his glasses clean, saw the blurred shape of Carl approaching.

"Burton."

"What?"

The proprietor ambled the length of the counter, stopped to remove a bottle of whiskey from the shelf and then stood opposite Burton, pouring both of them a shot.

"Your wife called looking for you."

"Did she leave a message?" The whiskey brought back everything the wind had taken from him.

"She said to tell you that John Warner's left Liz for her. They're running off together."

"What, again?"

"Hah!"

"What did Maggie want?"

"She says she can't make it this weekend and she hopes you won't mind. Somebody gave her a ticket to an opening at the Kennedy Center. She said call her back if there's a problem."

"No problem, my friend."

"You want something to eat?"

"If there's chowder I'll have that."

After he returned from the kitchen and set the steaming bowl in front of Glass, Carl came out from behind the bar to sit. The two men had known each other for many years. Burton sipped the broth delicately from his spoon.

“Get a new pup yet?” Carl asked.

“No.”

“A fellow up in Henlopen has a setter bitch that just had pups. You should have a look.”

“Alright. Maybe this weekend.”

“Rachel was a fine dog. Be hard to replace her, Burton.”

“Good dog, sure. Dumb though. Rather not have a dog if it can’t stand up to a goose.”

They had debated the point several times since it happened. Burton said the dog got into the lake, chasing the fowl back and forth, finally swam into an army of Canadians that converged on her. Carl insisted the dog was just old, too old to swim that much and a goose would be shy of a dog anyways. Red-haired Rachel must have drunk salt water and drowned, in Carl’s opinion. Burton no longer cared how it happened, he wouldn’t have another dog. Next time it would be the dog that was left behind.

He stared sleepily into his bowl. The milky chowder was the same color as the kiss he had discovered on the porch post. “Carl,” he began but stopped himself. He was going to tell about the kiss but thought better of it because when the words started to form they felt like a betrayal, like blabbing about the most intimate moments you had shared with somebody.

“What?” asked Carl.

“The chowder’s good. It’s what I needed.”

He thought about Rachel. Can’t have another dog, but maybe I should. Maybe that’s the way my wife is feeling. She didn’t put up any fuss. She said, Burton, I’ve known for a long time that’s what you wanted but I can’t spend the rest of my life up there. It’s too quiet for me. I can’t fit into a place like that after living in a city that has everything. That’s too much to ask but you go on. I’ll spend the summers there with you. The summers are good. And we’ll visit each other, like lovers. That’s the only way I can do it.

“You alright?” Carl asked. “You’re not getting a cold, are you?”

“No.”

“Another whiskey?”

“No, I’ll be getting back now.”

He stretched out on her bed and watched it happen, let the breeze turn warm again, the heat invade the day. He had a vision of her out there on the sand. She has tried to read her book but cannot focus; the words rise and recede on the page, throb behind her eyes, enter into her as some unintelligible force. She falls asleep on her towel and is unbothered. When she wakes she feels as if she has lost all privacy, that she has been possessed too much, too long, too hard, and every movement now brings pain.

The house is quiet, empty. Her husband never comes with her anymore. The girl is somewhere else, in town parading the boardwalk. The woman enters the room. Although she is still beautiful, still unaged, her face looks battered and blank, untouchable. She carefully removes her top and Burton is startled by her white breasts, so white they no longer seem to belong to the rest of her body. An elegant, enameled fingertip tests the sore red line that vees to the middle of her chest. Her nipples exaggerate the touch. The tight pressure of her skin makes the woman grimace.

Burton thought that now her husband might come and provide a motive for the kiss. He kept still and watched.

But she remains alone despite the expectation that Burton felt in the room. Her hair is swollen and scattered, lightened softly in places where the sun held, where it slowly branded her. Her abdomen is stretched taut, a small, dimpled drum, smoldering underneath the surface. Legs, arms and cheeks flame brilliantly, her lips pouted and raw as if they have been roughly, persistently, kissed. She twists the lid from a blue jar. Feverish and dizzy, she sinks her fingers into the cream, digging round and round. There is a burning that feels as if it empties her. She stands before the french doors looking out upon the water. Burton saw the strap lines on her back like perfect cuts where her torso had been separated by the sun. Below the horizon, the moon begins paddling the ocean, stroking the shadowed water. The woman steps from bedroom to porch, bending to draw down the bottom of her suit, the clear

unsunned flesh unnaturally luminescent, almost transparent, in the dying light. She rubs the cream onto her scorched body where it melts and sucks the coolness from the rising moon. Standing before the sea, she opens herself to this redemption and sways gratefully, one hand clutching the middle post, pressing her creamed lips against the wood.

Burton paused to study the lines, the ridges and cracks, the thin black space between full halves, this language of the past season, another life. He had loved his wife Maggie through thirty-nine years, four children and as many homes, a career that seemed more vague with each new day away from it, and now this, their negotiated freedom.

He dipped his brush into the fresh black paint and looked again at the white kiss in the middle of the post. It spoke so much for love when all else tried to ignore it. He traced a finger along the outline, withdrawing his hand finally with irritation at the sight of his gold wedding band. He thought he heard a phone ring somewhere and stopped to listen. It was only the tide coming in, rattling shells together in the trough at land's end. Burton stepped forward and kissed the kiss, glancing to see how closely his lips matched those on the wood. Then he painted over it.

face of whale & sharp round but for expressionless the eyes & the nothing of human classing

lubricated with greasy tears -

eyes shine in dark because of reflective backing
no eyebrows, eyelashes, or tears

but eyelids for protection
corner balled in only scarlet

No winds. No waves. No clouds.
The ascent of a dorsal fin
chipping the greased water,
sliding in languid circles

staring from
patted skin's
eyeball would
with a single
transparent skin

soft, sizzling breath

measuring & warming
unappetized by water,
the lampbrush bodies
willowae; jaws
yap, spit, ooze

Beached whale
Someone had hacked off its
flukes for a souvenir
Two other people had carved
their umbilics deeply into
its side. Someone else
had stuck a cigar butt into
its blowhole.

Clicks. Trills. Hoots.

But mostly a slow song

like a record at wrong speeds

echoing under water

open blowhole gurgling & bubbling

Small dogs dashing, frolic with the
fragrance of blood & urine

white chin rearing on shore

doomed to die from his own great weight

flippers shimmer as they turn like hanks or wheels (like doilies)

a wider plants of his throat

baleen plates frayed out into long bristles (enormous hairy doormat)
bristles shaped & polished like stones, all protuberance rubbed away
larger from
use

Soft heart

skin thin & smooth as glass very sensitive only penis leathery

scars from bumping into ice floes film of algae blooming on skin (sulfur yellow)

round lumpy scars

covered with small crustaceans 1000 lbs of barnacles

Small brown eye set near each corner of mouth
where upturned groove suggests a smile
(smile at the corner of the mouth)

buzzing around us blowhole emits a
Stream of bubbles
frozen death-gun

Spring-like crustaceans
Sea butterflies 20 kinds of
water fleas
parent crabs
whale lice (small crustaceans
crawling on belly)
dead man's
fungus (stuffed barnacles)
fish, shad, writhing crustaceans



Renate Ponsold

The Art of Poetry XXIX Stanley Kunitz

This interview took place during the winter of 1977 in Stanley Kunitz' brownstone in New York City's Greenwich Village. The apartment's ceilings are high. A number of modern paintings cover the height of the walls, fitted together in a great mosaic. Many are inscribed from artists of the New York School, the so-called Irascibles—Kline, Motherwell, Rothko, among them. Kunitz' wife is the distinguished painter, Elise Asher. Included in the collection are works which the poet confesses are his own—assemblages in the manner of Joseph Cornell composed of American folk-art items.

Kunitz, slightly stooped from a bout of arthritis, is now in

his seventies. The summer before, at his Provincetown home on Cape Cod, he had been obliged to hire a gardener to help him with his weeding. He had been equally depressed at having to give up tennis: he could no longer play fiercely, and therefore it was not so much fun to play. But once, as he likes to recall, he could justly claim the tennis championship of the poetry world.

*Certainly as regards his own craft Kunitz is in the first rank. "A reassurance as to what poetry can be in these times," Richard Wilbur wrote of *The Testing-Tree* in 1971. The works which confirm this include *Intellectual Things*, *Passport to the War*, *Selected Poems* (which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1959), *The Testing-Tree*, and this year's collection, *The Poems of Stanley Kunitz (1928-78)*.*

*In recent years Kunitz has edited *The Yale Series of Younger Poets*, served as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, and taught at a number of universities, including Bennington, Brandeis, Yale, Princeton, and Columbia. He is currently senior professor in the graduate writing program at Columbia.*

He is the recipient of many honors—a member of the American Academy of Art and Letters and a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. Much of the year he spends in Cape Cod, where he works with the The Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, a resident community of young artists and writers. As is suggested in the interview which follows, he thinks highly of the farming profession.

The interview consolidates two long afternoons of taping. Late on the second day, after hours of talking with occasional sips of akvavit (the glasses were a gift from e.e. cummings), there came the voices of children echoing in the neighboring school courtyard. The poet switched on a light at his desk. Something that had been said induced him to search through a wilderness of papers for his copy of Hopkins. Instantly the book was opened to the proper page, and with a deep resonance, he began reading one of the Terrible Sonnets. This was the privileged moment for the interviewer. There is unfortunately no way to reproduce how Kunitz made the lines ring with

emotion. But subsequently, when the tapes were played, the transcriber's dog, customarily indifferent to mechanical sounds, pricked up his ears at the harrowing hiss of the sonnet's last words: "The lost are like this, and their scourge to be / As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse."

INTERVIEWER

Is it an actual fact, as you indicate in "The Portrait," that your father killed himself in a public park some months before you were born?

KUNITZ

I really didn't know too much about it. It floated in the air during my childhood. I never had any specific information. I didn't know the exact details until I happened to be in Worcester, reading. I went over to the city hall and asked for my father's death certificate and there it was. Age 39. Death by suicide. Carbohic acid. It would have torn his guts out. Strong stuff. I'm not sure how I learned he did it in a park. Maybe my older sister told me. That scene has always haunted me. There's a reference to it in a poem called "The Hemorrhage." He becomes the fallen king, a Christ figure. My original title was "The Man in the Park."

INTERVIEWER

Your father has always figured strongly in your poetry, and he continues to do so in *The Testing-Tree*. But I noticed here, for the first time, that your mother asserts a prominence.

KUNITZ

That's true. My mother has become closer to me in recent years. I understand her more than I did in the beginning. There were two strong wills in that household, hers and mine, so that our natural tensions were magnified. We held each other at a distance. She was the most competent woman I have ever known—I respected that. But it took years—after her death at

eighty-six—for me to be touched by the beauty and bravery of her spirit.

INTERVIEWER

In *The Testing-Tree*, though, there isn't quite that portrait of her. She seems a woman of unforgiveness. She is "a grey eye peeping." She guards you joylessly. In "The Portrait" she refuses to forgive your father for killing himself.

KUNITZ

Well, she was unconcessive in many ways. And it's true that she refused ever to speak to me about my father. She obliterated every trace of him. In her very last years, at my request, she began writing her memoirs. It's a remarkable document, which I will someday use in one form or other. She is fresh and vital writing about her childhood in Russia. And her emigration to this country. And her work as an operator in the sweatshops of New York's lower East Side. About everything until she moved to Worcester. Until she met my father. Then she froze, and wrote no more.

INTERVIEWER

Where in Russia did she come from?

KUNITZ

Lithuania.

INTERVIEWER

Did she speak Lithuanian or Russian at home?

KUNITZ

No. She spoke English, though she was twenty-three when she came here in 1890, with no knowledge of the language. She went to night school, read a good deal, educated herself.

INTERVIEWER

Was there much discussion of Russian writers in your house, as a boy?

KUNITZ

Not a great deal. But there was a good library. For that period and for that middle-class world, rather exceptional. There was a complete set of Tolstoy, complete Dickens, complete Shakespeare. An unabridged dictionary. A big illustrated Bible—both Testaments. A lot of history, history of all nations. The classic books. Gibbon. Goethe. Dante's *Inferno* illustrated by Gustave Doré. There was a sense of civilization there.

INTERVIEWER

You say very directly in "An Old Cracked Tune" that "my mother's breast was thorny, / and father I had none." Is this comfortless situation based simply on her attitude toward your father or did it arrive out of your relationship with her?

KUNITZ

My mother was a working woman, absent all day—in that era a rare phenomenon. She was one of the pioneer business women, a dress designer and manufacturer. I was always left in the care of others and didn't have an intimate day-to-day contact with her. When she came home in the evening, she was tired and easily vexed, impatient with my moodiness. She was not one to demonstrate affection physically—in fact, I don't recall ever being kissed by her during my childhood. Yet I never doubted her fierce love for me. And pride in me for my little scholastic triumphs and early literary productions.

INTERVIEWER

My favorite poem of yours is "King of the River," and I believe my reason is that the salmon, ostensibly the subject of the poem, is half-fish, half-Kunitz. Could we talk a little about how the poem came into being?

KUNITZ

What triggered "King of the River," I recall, was a brief report in *Time* of some new research on the aging process of the Pacific salmon. I wrote the poem in Provincetown one fall—my favorite writing season. The very first lines came to me with

their conditional syntax and suspended clauses, a winding and falling movement. The rest seemed to flow, maybe because I'm never very far from the creature world. Some of my deepest feelings have to do with plants and animals. In my bad times they've sustained me. It may be pertinent that I experienced a curious elation while confronting the unpleasant reality of being mortal, the inexorable process of my own decay. Perhaps I had managed to "distance" my fate—the salmon was doing my dying for me.

A poem has secrets that the poet knows nothing of. It takes on a life and a will of its own. It might have proceeded differently—towards catastrophe, resignation, terror, despair—and I still would have to claim it. Valéry said that poetry is a language within a language. It is also a language beyond language, a meta-medium—that is, metabolic, metaphoric, metamorphic. A poet's collected work is his book of changes. The great meditations on death have a curious exaltation. I suppose it comes from the realization, even on the threshold, that one isn't done with one's changes.

INTERVIEWER

Isn't it true that a poet has preferences among his own poems in the same way that he has preferences among the poems of other poets? That specialness isn't always based on sheer quality. You yourself have defended a line from "Father and Son" that critics have complained was obscure or ugly even. If I remember, the line went: "...the night nailed like an orange to my brow." But you felt that nails and fruit have had a long history in your consciousness and that you didn't give a damn whether someone liked it or not. Do you have any of that obstinate fondness for this poem?

KUNITZ

Some days I have an obstinate fondness for all my poems. Other days I dislike them intensely. I'll concede that the poems of mine that stay freshest for me in the long run are the archetypal ones, of which "King of the River" is undoubtedly an example. I mean archetypal in the Jungian sense, with refer-

ence to imagery rooted in the collective unconscious. I am no longer attracted to or tempted by the sort of metaphysical abstraction that led me in my youth to write—somewhat presumptuously, it seems to me now—of daring “to vie with God for his eternity.” The images I seek are those derived from bodily immersion in what Conrad called “the destructive element.” That salmon battering towards the dam. . . .

INTERVIEWER

Is this a Christian God you’re contending with?

KUNITZ

Call Him the God of all gods. I have no sectarian faith.

INTERVIEWER

Roethke mentions in one of his letters that “Kunitz called me the best Jewish poet in America.” I was wondering what you meant by that.

KUNITZ

It sounds like me, but I don’t remember the occasion. I was probably just teasing him about being guilt-ridden and full of moral imperatives. Besides, he had inherited some anti-Semitic reflexes from his Prussian ancestors.

INTERVIEWER

I’m trying to find a delicate way of asking you to comment on a rather offensive characterization of you by Harold Bloom. He includes you with several poets who he feels have evaded their Jewish heritage in their poetry.

KUNITZ

Cripes!

INTERVIEWER

Insofar as your poems are morally conscious they may be construed to be Jewish. The son in “Father and Son” asks his absent father to “teach me to be kind.” One great aim of your

work is to discover the ethical content of your own unconscious.

KUNITZ

It's obvious that Jewish cultural aspiration and ethical doctrine entered into my bloodstream, but in practice I am an American freethinker, a damn stubborn one, and my poetry is not hyphenated. I said a few minutes ago that I had no religion, but I should have added that I have strong religious feelings. Moses and Jesus and Lao-tse have all instructed me. And the prophets as well, from Isaiah to Blake—though Blake is closer to me. I had never thought of it before, but it's true that three of the poets who most strongly influenced me—Donne, Herbert, Hopkins—happen to have been Christian churchmen.

INTERVIEWER

Bloom's point was that the Jewish poet cannot offer his wholehearted surrender to a Gentile precursor.

KUNITZ

Bloom should ask himself why all his poets are WASPs.

INTERVIEWER

In the years before 1959, when you were awarded the Pulitzer Prize, you were relatively obscure as a poet. Can I have your reasons for that?

KUNITZ

I am not and never was a prolific or fashionable poet. For a long time I lived apart from the literary world, in rural isolation. During my middle years my poems were said to be too dark and obscure, though they seem quite intelligible now. To this day I've had very little serious critical attention. Maybe I don't know how lucky I've been!

INTERVIEWER

I detect certain mannerisms of Eliot in some of the early poems.

KUNITZ

Eliot invented a tone of voice and put his stamp on the meta-physical mode. In my generation, the next after his, one would have to be a fool not to learn something from him. But in fundamental respects I rejected what he stood for. From the beginning I was a subjective poet in contradiction to the dogma propounded by Eliot and his disciples that objectivity, impersonality, was the goal of art. Furthermore, I despised his politics. It's ironic that a generation later, when confessional poetry, so-called, became the rage, I was classified as a late convert to the confessional school. That made me laugh and shudder. My struggle is to use the life in order to transcend it, to convert it into legend.

INTERVIEWER

What were some of the other pressures that brought about the looser style of the poems in *The Testing-Tree*?

KUNITZ

The language of my poetry's always been accessible, even when the syntax was complex. I've never used an esoteric vocabulary, though some of my information may have been special. I believe there is such an intrinsic relationship between form and content that the moment you start writing a poem in pentameters you tend to revert to an Elizabethan idiom. "Night Letter," for example, is rhetorically an Elizabethan poem. What strikes me, as I read and reread the poetry and prose of the Elizabethans, is that they had a longer breath unit—their language was still bubbling and rich in qualifiers, in adjectives and adverbs. The nouns and verbs of Shakespeare couldn't, by themselves, fulfill the line and give it enough richness of texture for the Renaissance taste. I acquired a taste for that kind of opulence of language, but as the years went on I began to realize that my breath units didn't require so long a line. By my middle period I was mainly working with tetrameters, which eliminated at least one adjective from every line. In my current phase I've stripped that down still more. I want

the energy to be concentrated in my nouns and verbs, and I write mostly in trimeters, since my natural span of breath seems to be three beats. It seems to me so natural now that I scarcely ever feel the need for a longer line. Sometimes I keep a little clock going when people talk to me and I notice they too are speaking in trimeters. Back in the Elizabethan Age I'd have heard pentameters.

INTERVIEWER

Does the increased accessibility of the poems in *The Testing-Tree* indicate a significant change in your aesthetic?

KUNITZ

At my age, after you're done—or ruefully think you're done—with the nagging anxieties and complications of your youth, what is there left for you to confront but the great simplicities? I never tire of bird-song and sky and weather. I want to write poems that are natural, luminous, deep, spare. I dream of an art so transparent that you can look through and see the world.

INTERVIEWER

Occasionally a poem of yours—"The War Against the Trees" is an example—will sound mock heroic on the page, and I am surprised that the tone in which I've heard you read it is not at all mock heroic.

KUNITZ

Irony is one of the ingredients there—but I shouldn't call it mock heroic.

INTERVIEWER

Take a line like this: "... the bulldozers, drunk with gasoline, / Tested the virtue of the soil." Or: "All day the hireling engines charged the trees. . . forcing the giants to their knees." It's the magnification of the event and the personification of the bulldozers and the trees.

KUNITZ

Well, I suppose that for me the rape of nature is an event of a certain magnitude. My feeling for the land is more than an abstraction. I've always been mad about gardening, and used to think, when I was struggling to survive, that I could end my days quite happily working as a gardener on some big estate. In Provincetown I tend my terraces flowering on the bay. I'm out there grubbing every summer morning. The man in one of my poems who "carries a bag of earth on his back" must be my double.

INTERVIEWER

One doesn't think of you as a pastoral poet, but you draw a good deal of your sustenance from the natural world. For most of your adult life you've chosen to live in the country.

KUNITZ

With the first five hundred dollars I saved after coming to New York I bought a hundred-acre farm on Wormwood Hill in Mansfield Center, Connecticut, and moved there with my first wife. That was in 1930. I loved the woods and fields and the grand old eighteenth-century house, with its gambrel roof. But we were poor, and living conditions were primitive, without electricity or central heating or even running water. Eventually I made the improvements that the house required—mostly with my own hands—but I couldn't save the marriage. Later, for the span of my second marriage, I lived in Bucks County, Pennsylvania—beautiful country. That's the locale of "River Road." I've always needed space around me, a piece of ground to cultivate, and the feel of living creatures. I'm never bored in the country. Very few of my poems deal with urban situations.

INTERVIEWER

What about the need for friendship and literary stimulation?

KUNITZ

I didn't realize what I was missing until one evening Ted

Roethke drove down to New Hope from Lafayette and knocked at my door, unannounced, with a copy of *Intellectual Things* in his hand. It astonished me that this big, shambling stranger knew my poems by heart.

INTERVIEWER

Roethke at this time had published only a few poems?

KUNITZ

He had published practically nothing, but was working on the poems that eventually became *Open House*. That was a saving relationship for both of us. I sensed he needed me even more than I needed him.

INTERVIEWER

You were both lonely. But he sought somebody out.

KUNITZ

He was much more aggressive than I, more socially ambitious, and he soon had a world of literary friendships, of which I would hear when he came to see me. He would tell me about Louise Bogan and Leonie Adams and Rolfe Humphries and, a bit later, Auden and all the others that he sought out and gathered to him. But he did not bring us together. His policy was to keep his friends apart.

INTERVIEWER

Were you a loner on some principle or were you naturally shy?

KUNITZ

As a young man I was preternaturally shy. For years it was difficult for me to reach out to others. I'd lived such an inward life for so long. I think I'm more open with people now.

INTERVIEWER

In your early poems there are fairly frequent references to your youth as being a period of despair, as if you resented it. In

one you say, “. . . innocence betrayed me in a room of mocking elders.”

KUNITZ

I've been through many dark nights, but the guilts I've expressed aren't meant to be interpreted confessionally. Somebody once asked me, quite bluntly, what it was I felt so guilty about. I replied, "For being fallible and mortal." Does that make me sound terribly glum? Believe me, I've had my share of joys. And I'm still ready for more.

INTERVIEWER

You had an unhappy period in the army during World War II. What were the circumstances?

KUNITZ

Briefly, I was drafted, just short of my thirty-eighth birthday, as a conscientious objector, with moral scruples against bearing arms. My understanding with the draft board was that I would be assigned to a service unit, such as the Medical Corps. Instead the papers on my status got lost or were never delivered, and I was shuttled for three years from camp to camp, doing KP duty most of the time or digging latrines. A combination of pneumonia, scarlet fever, and just downright humiliation almost did me in. While I was still in uniform, *Passport to the War*, my bleakest book, was published, but I was scarcely aware of the event. It seemed to sink without a trace.

INTERVIEWER

In the period before you went into the army, what magazines were you publishing in?

KUNITZ

I was publishing very little then. Witty, elegant, Auden-esque poems were in demand then, not mine. I was lucky to get my book published at all. Practically every major publishing firm rejected it before Holt took it. I had the same unflattering experience with my *Selected Poems*, fourteen years later,

before Atlantic accepted them.

INTERVIEWER

Aside from Roethke, did you have any staunch supporters?

KUNITZ

I had more than I knew, but no lines of communication between us. Imagine my surprise to learn, on my discharge from the army in '45, that I had been awarded a Guggenheim fellowship, for which I had never applied. When I inquired how it could have happened, I was told that Marianne Moore, whom I wasn't to meet until years later, had been my intercessor.

INTERVIEWER

At forty you still thought of yourself as a stranger?

KUNITZ

I'm reminded of a passage in a letter from Henry James in reply to a young admirer of his. This was late in his life. "You ask me from what port I embark? That port is my essential loneliness."

INTERVIEWER

Your earlier poems have been accused—I should say that is the right word—of being overly intellectual. . .

KUNITZ

(laughs) . . . which is nonsense.

INTERVIEWER

But when one dwells on the paradox that such work as you have produced is urbane only in its complexity, not in its concerns, then one begins to see that there is something real in your choice to live apart from the city. Perhaps there is something about much thought, small conversation, and the endless blue of country skies that stunts the smart aleck and develops one's mystical sense, as if one is left without a lan-

guage adequate for wonder. In the language that one does find, there is both great strain and mystical attainment.

KUNITZ

I am happy that you made this comment because that strain in my work that you refer to as mystical—a suspect word—is one that I don't think anybody has ever really noted before or commented on. One of my primary convictions is that I am not a reasonable poet.

INTERVIEWER

One of your poems—"The Science of the Night"—has a passage: "We are not souls but systems, and we move in clouds of our unknowing." Is that a direct reference to the text by the medieval religious mystic?

KUNITZ

Yes. *The Cloud of Unknowing*—haunting phrase. But, sure, I think that what we strive for is to move from the world of our immediate knowing, our limited range of information, into the unknown. My poems don't come easy—I have to fight for them. In my struggle I have the sense of swimming underwater towards some kind of light and open air that will be saving. Redemption is a theme that concerns me. We have to learn how to live with our frailties. The best people I know are inadequate and unashamed.

INTERVIEWER

Can you say something about how you manage to find "the language that saves"?

KUNITZ

The poem in the head is always perfect. Resistance starts when you try to convert it into language. Language itself is a kind of resistance to the pure flow of self. The solution is to become one's language. You cannot write a poem until you hit upon its rhythm. That rhythm not only belongs to the subject matter, it belongs to your interior world, and the moment they

hook up there's a quantum leap of energy. You can ride on that rhythm, it will carry you somewhere strange. The next morning you look at the page and wonder how it all happened. You have to triumph over all your diurnal glibness and cheapness and defensiveness.

INTERVIEWER

One of my ideas about your poetry is that there are two voices, arguing with each other. One is the varied voice of personality, the voice that speaks in the context of a dramatic situation. The other is an internal voice, the voice that's rhythm. It governs a poem's movement the way the waves govern the movement of a boat—seldom do the two want to go in the same direction.

KUNITZ

The struggle is between incantation and sense. There's always a song lying under the surface of these poems. It's an incantation that wants to take over—it really doesn't need a language—all it needs is sounds. The sense has to struggle to assert itself, to mount the rhythm and become inseparable from it.

INTERVIEWER

Would you say that rhythm is feeling, in and of itself?

KUNITZ

Rhythm to me, I suppose, is essentially what Hopkins called the taste of self. I taste myself as rhythm.

INTERVIEWER

How wide a variety of rhythms do you feel?

KUNITZ

The psyche has one central rhythm—capable, of course, of variations, as in music. You must seek your central rhythm in order to find out who you are.

INTERVIEWER

So you would agree you could say about music that Bach's central rhythm is devotional and Mozart's is gay, sunny and exuberant. How would you define your own rhythm in these terms?

KUNITZ

Mine, I think, is essentially dark and grieving—elegiac. Sometimes I counterpoint it, but the ground melody is what I mostly hear.

INTERVIEWER

With respect to rhythm, could you discuss your term "functional stressing"?

KUNITZ

Functional stressing is simply my way of coping with the problem of writing a musical line that isn't dependent on the convention of alternating slack and stressed syllables. What I usually hear these days is a line with three strong stresses in it—that's my basic measure. I don't make a point of counting stresses—the process is largely unconscious, determined by my ear. A line can have any number of syllables, and sometimes it will add or eliminate a stress. Rhythm depends on a degree of regularity, but the imagination requires an illusion of freedom. This functional stressing is related to Hopkins' concept of sprung rhythm. Except that he understood sprung rhythm—mistakenly, I believe—to be a falling rhythm, whereas my rhythm is usually rising. Furthermore, functional stressing dispenses with the notion of the metrical foot as a unit in the line. The system of stresses is the organizing principle of a poem. I tend to dwell on long vowels and to play them against the consonants; and I love to modulate the flow of a poem, to change the pace, so that it quickens and then slows, becomes alternately fluid and clotted. The language of a poem must do more than convey experience: it must embody it.

INTERVIEWER

Is this what you look for in the poems of others, that feeling

of there it “happened” to him, that feeling of oneness with his subject? Take a writer like D.H. Lawrence, who’s utterly unlike you.

KUNITZ

Nevertheless, he’s a poet I admire. I think of “The Snake” or, better still, “The Ship of Death”—his ecstatic funeral song. He’s a dying man, sailing out towards the unknown—a rocking, redundant movement—and you’re on board with him, sharing his destiny, a passenger on the same ship, which is so real you feel the glow of the sunset and the coming of the night.

INTERVIEWER

And that transcends any literary consideration?

KUNITZ

It transcends it. You mustn’t let the aesthetic of a period determine for you what’s good or bad in poetry.

INTERVIEWER

That’s why it must be so annoying for you to have critics praise you for your skillful craft.

KUNITZ

Oh, I hate that. I take it as a put-down. Unless craft is second nature, it means nothing. Craft can point the way, it can hone an instrument to a fine cutting edge, but it’s not to be confused with an art of transformation, that magical performance.

INTERVIEWER

Frost talks about the poet, or himself rather, as a performer, as an athlete is a performer. In what sense do you mean that writing is a performance?

KUNITZ

A trapeze artist on his high wire is performing and defying death at the same time. He’s doing more than showing off his

skill; he's using his skill to stay alive. Art demands that sense of risk, of danger. But few artists in any period risk their lives. The truth is they're not on a high enough wire. This makes me think of an incident in my childhood. In the woods behind our house in Worcester was an abandoned quarry—you'll find mention of it in "The Testing-Tree." This deep-cut quarry had a sheer granite face. I visited it almost every day, alone in the woods, and in my magic Keds I'd try to climb it, till the height made me dizzy. I was always testing myself. There was nobody to watch me. I was testing myself to see how high I could go. There was very little ledge, almost nothing to hold on to. Occasionally I'd find a plant or a few blades of tough grass in the crevices, but the surface was almost vertical, with only the most precarious toehold. One day I was out there and I climbed—oh, it was a triumph!—almost to the top. And then I couldn't get down. I couldn't go up or down. I just clung there that whole afternoon and through the long night. Next morning the police and fire department found me. They put up a ladder and brought me down. I must say my mother didn't appreciate that I was inventing a metaphor for poetry.

INTERVIEWER

In "The Testing-Tree," when you threw the three stones against the oak, you don't mention how many hit. If you hit once, it was for love; twice, and you would be a poet; three times, and you would live forever.

KUNITZ

I got awfully efficient. In the end I almost never missed. I've always excelled at hand-and-eye coordination, any sort of ball game. That makes me think of a game I used to play with Roethke. I put a little waste basket at one end of the room, and then we'd try to pitch tennis balls into it from the opposite corner. Each successful pitch was worth a dime. If I made ten shots in a row and he made three, he owed me 70¢. Well, I was really phenomenal at this, and I made a small fortune from Roethke. In fact, he refused to play with me any more because he said I was practicing during his absence. It's true enough.

Sometimes I still play that game against myself.

INTERVIEWER

I recall a poker game last summer with Mark Strand, B. H. Friedman, Daniel Halpern, and some painters. You hadn't played in twenty years. If there is an analogy between sports—games—and poetry, what or whom is the poet competing against?

KUNITZ

Eternity. A losing battle, for in that abyss all egos, cities, nations, histories are buried. Even Shakespeare will ultimately be forgotten. The best a poet can hope for is to be remembered for a while, to pass from one generation into another, to have some young person in another age open to a page and say, "How beautiful!" or "How true! He must have been like me."

INTERVIEWER

With respect to what you have just said, how did you sustain your ambition during your years of isolation?

KUNITZ

If I inherited my father's vulnerability, I also inherited my mother's pride and stubbornness. During those years when I was most obscure and when I had no reputation at all, I never really doubted myself or thought I was a finished poet. I knew that the struggle was still going on inside me. I was still fighting for that language, still full of curiosity, of love and hate and all the emotions that make one know one is alive. So when a few lucky things happened, I wasn't overwhelmed. It seemed the natural order of things. Nothing to be hilarious about. If one lives in the world of struggle for language and truth, the things that happen outside are not terribly important. The same honor given one year to you goes the next year to some clown.

INTERVIEWER

How did you get involved with teaching?

KUNITZ

When I was in the service I got a letter from Lewis Webster Jones, the president of Bennington, offering me a teaching job when I got out of the Army. I was staggered. I had never taught before. I'd been free-lancing and editing for The H. W. Wilson Co., but I hadn't taught at all and I couldn't understand why I was being asked to come and teach at Bennington. It turned out that Roethke, who had been teaching there, had had a violent breakdown and had locked himself into his cottage, threatening anybody who came near him, especially the president. He was finally induced to carry on a conversation. He said he knew the jig was up—he'd have to leave. But he'd come out and be peaceful on one condition—that they invite me to take his place.

INTERVIEWER

Did you look forward to this?

KUNITZ

I'd always been hungry to teach, though I thought I never would after my initial rejection at Harvard.

INTERVIEWER

Could you go into that?

KUNITZ

At Harvard I stayed on for my Masters with the thought of becoming a member of the faculty. It seemed to me a not unreasonable expectation, since I had graduated *summa cum laude* and won most of the important prizes, including the Garrison Medal for Poetry. When I inquired about it, the word came back from the English faculty that I couldn't hope to teach there because "Anglo-Saxons would resent being taught English by a Jew." I was humiliated and enraged. Even half a century later I have no great feeling of warmth for my alma mater. Of course that was in the dark ages of the American Academy. A few years after I left, Jews were no longer considered to be pariahs. From this vantage point I'm glad I didn't

stay and become an academician. All those years of struggle taught me a great deal about the vicissitudes of life. My scrambling for survival kept me from being insulated from common experience. It certainly fed my political passions.

INTERVIEWER

What did you do after you left Harvard?

KUNITZ

I went back to Worcester and became a staff reporter on the *Worcester Telegram*. I had been a summer reporter on the *Telegram* since my sophomore year, when I wrote an impertinent letter to the editor, saying that I thought the paper could use somebody who knew how to write. As proof of my literary prowess, I enclosed an impressionistic panegyric on James Joyce—this was in 1923. In a few days, much to my amazement, I received a letter from Capt. Roland Andrews, editor-in-chief, saying that by God I *could* write and a job was mine for the asking. As a full-time member of the staff I became assistant Sunday editor and wrote a literary column and did some features. Then I was assigned to the Sacco-Vanzetti case. I soon saw that a terrible injustice was being perpetrated. My particular assignment was to cover the judge, Judge Webster Thayer, a mean little frightened man who hated the guts of these “anarchistic bastards.” He could not conceivably give them a fair trial. I was so vehement about this miscarriage of justice, so filled with it, that around the newspaper office they used to call me “Sacco.” After the executions, I became obsessed with the notion that Vanzetti’s eloquent letters should be published and received permission to see what I could do about it. I gave up my job on the *Telegram* and went to New York alone. I had nothing, no money, no friends. I made the rounds of the publishing houses, but nobody would touch the book. The whole country was in the grip of one of its periodic Red scares. I was virtually penniless by the time I landed a job with The H.W. Wilson Company.

INTERVIEWER

You quit your job with the *Worcester Telegram* expressly to

find publication for the letters?

KUNITZ

I sensed it was time for me to leave. Curiously, I was twenty-three when I came to New York, the same age as my mother when she landed at the immigrant station on Castle Garden.

INTERVIEWER

Your career seems larger at both ends. You first published when you were quite young and now, as you have put it, you're threatening to become prolific.

KUNITZ

I like the verb "threatening."

INTERVIEWER

Who were the critics who helped you keep faith in yourself?

KUNITZ

The blunt truth is that I owe damn little to critics. Yvor Winters praised my first book, but then I lost him because he accused me of betraying the iambic foot. Mark Schorer and Jean Hagstrum and Ralph Mills have written commentaries that I appreciate. Roethke was my advocate almost from the start, when he himself was struggling for recognition, but I don't think of him as a critic. The same holds true for Lowell and Wilbur and Eberhart, who have been friends since the late fifties. I mustn't forget to mention the late Henry Rago, editor of *Poetry*, a dear friend, who encouraged me when I most needed encouragement, and who was largely responsible for the recognition that came to me with the publication of *Selected Poems*. None of the critics associated with the New Criticism paid any attention to me then. Robert Penn Warren and Allen Tate befriended me later.

INTERVIEWER

What sort of function or role are you trying to accomplish in your own criticism?

KUNITZ

I'm not programmatic. I suppose I try to establish the connections between language and action, aesthetics and moral values, the individual and society.

INTERVIEWER

Your pieces on other poets are invariably sympathetic at heart.

KUNITZ

I've made a point of not writing about poets with whom I am not sympathetic. There's plenty of negativism around about poets. I don't feel any need to contribute more. Of course I recognize differences. For example, my essay on Robinson Jeffers attacks his political insensibility about Hitler, but at the same time it is written with true respect for his achievement as a poet. If you understand a poet's key images, you have a clue to the understanding of his whole work. I wish criticism would spend more time in the intimate pursuit of those central images. That's a more productive concern than ratings and influences.

INTERVIEWER

In the tone you take in your reviews do you feel you're speaking directly to the poet under review?

KUNITZ

I think so. In my personal experience the most helpful criticism has been from fellow poets. The best criticism is addressed to the poet over the heads of the public. It's not judgmental but collaborative. It aims to help the poet find his own self in the course of his sometimes obscure progress, where he is dark even to himself. The analogous relationship is that of coach to athlete. You're all for your man to score, to win; you don't jeer at him. "Bad one! Bad one! That was a terrible shot!" Recently at the Guggenheim, after I had introduced Robert Penn Warren, with heartfelt praise for his new Selected volume, he remarked to the audience: "I'm going to tell you a great secret,

about how to get on as a poet. Have fine poets for your friends!”

INTERVIEWER

What is the origin of your early imagery of spikes and cones and spheres?

KUNITZ

I don't know. It could be religious, or cubistic, or scientific. I haven't mentioned that I had an apprenticeship with Alfred North Whitehead during my last year at Harvard. He was giving an advanced course in the nature of the physical universe. I didn't have the prerequisites, but I wanted very much to be one of the handful permitted to study with him. I went to see Whitehead. He asked me why I wanted to be in his group. I said, "I'll give you two reasons. I admire you extravagantly and I'm a poet." He said, "You're in." I learned a lot from him.

INTERVIEWER

You also met the "Moon Man" in Worcester?

KUNITZ

Dr. Robert H. Goddard. Yes. This was in the spring of 1926 while I was on the *Telegram*. One day the city editor said to me, "There's a crazy man in town playing around with rockets. Why don't you go over and see him?" So I went over to Clark University where Goddard was professor of physics. I may have been the first person ever to interview him. This was shortly after he had made the great experiment outside the city limits of Worcester—in an open field in Auburn he had fired the first liquid-fueled rocket. He told me about this with quiet intensity. I said, "How high did it go?" And he said, "184 feet in 2.5 seconds." "Is that all?" I said. His voice turned a little shrill, "Young man, don't you see? It's all solved! We'll make it to the moon! Because the principle is right, don't you see, don't you see?" He went to his blackboard. A little man, very professorial looking, completely obsessed with his calculations and diagrams. I have an unpublished poem about this

encounter. He made me feel somehow connected with him, as though both of us were shooting for the moon, in different ways.

INTERVIEWER

His story was your story?

KUNITZ

I suppose I made it mine. That's the way with the imagination.

INTERVIEWER

Not many poets writing during the early years of your career were attracted to science?

KUNITZ

And no wonder. After a quarter of a century I still have to explain to audiences what I am doing with the metaphor of the red shift in "The Science of the Night." Such terminology ought to be just as common knowledge as the myths were in Ancient Greece. The vocabulary of modern science is fascinating—I read everything I can find about pulsars and black holes and charm and quarks—but, by and large, the vocabulary remains exclusive and specialized. The more we know about the universe, the less understandable it becomes. The classic world had more reality than ours. At least it thought it understood what reality was. In 1948, I recall, Niels Bohr visited Bennington and drew a neat picture of neutrons and protons on the blackboard. In the question period that followed I asked him, "Is this really the structure of the atom, or is it your metaphor for the present state of our information about it?" He preferred then not to accept that distinction. Today a diagram of the atom would look vastly different, more complicated, and I would not need to repeat the question.

INTERVIEWER

Scientists think their metaphors are not heuristic.

KUNITZ

The popular impression is that their metaphors are real and the poet's metaphors are unreal. But both are trying to find metaphors for reality. It always haunts me that human beings were accumulating experience and knowledge in their bodies before they had a language. That's where our oldest wisdom is. The language of the imagination is a body language. That's why poetry is resistant to abstractions.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you suppose the metaphors of scientists are taken with much more seriousness than those of poets?

KUNITZ

Because we live in a pragmatic society, and the effects of science are evident, whereas the consequences of poetry are invisible. How many truly believe that if poetry were to be suppressed, the light of our civilization would go out?

INTERVIEWER

If there are few serious readers of poetry, how is its light disseminated?

KUNITZ

Largely it's disseminated among the young. A sizable fraction of the youth in our universities read poetry, hear poets and are excited by them. Any poet who travels across the country knows this to be true. Many of these students will go out into the world and never read another book of poems, but if only a fraction of them retain their interest, it will be a significant change for the better. It occurs to me that, though poets don't have large readership, their product in diluted form comes down to the mass population—in popular music, popular song, in all the areas of commercialized art. Popular art in this country today is a reduced, somewhat degraded form of high art, in contrast to other epochs, when popular art fed high art. Writers of the ballads inspired the poets of the Romantic move-

ment. Nursery rhymes entered into the imagination of the poets in all centuries. Now we are getting the reverse process—high art, in its diluted state, touches everybody. Bob Dylan couldn't have existed if Dylan Thomas hadn't existed before him.

INTERVIEWER

Since the media occupy a paradoxical relationship to art as a diluter, but also as a disseminator, are they an ally of art?

KUNITZ

They could be, but they aren't. Yet every once in a while something comes along to remind you of possibilities. Haley's *Roots* on TV, for example, which stirred a nation's conscience—at least for a few nights. It gave white masters an opportunity to redeem themselves through guilt. Incidentally, I was in Ghana and Senegal last spring. The curious thing that struck me was that young African poets are trying to forget their tribal and colonial past. The main collective effort is to move into high technology and to overleap centuries of industrial backwardness. The poets want to jump smack into the Western world and write like Westerners. They study and imitate us. One young Ghanaian told me he felt guilty about not writing in his tribal language, but he scarcely knew it and it was too difficult to master for literary purposes. In our culture, we have a counter-phenomenon. Our poets are trying to rediscover our tribal past, the bonds that hold us together. The search back into the roots of our common life is an archetypal journey. We have to go back and reconstruct the foundation myths, so they will live again for us. Poetry is tied to memory. As we grow older, our childhood returns to us out of the mists. I may be mistaken, but my impression is that early in the century—I'm speaking in general terms—a child had fewer advantages, but he was more innocent, more hopeful, more ambitious than his grandchildren today. We really believed then that society was on our side.

INTERVIEWER

And now?

KUNITZ

Well, the young people I know have neither innocence nor guilt nor faith in the future. They feel they're not responsible for their inheritance. Of course, there are exceptions.

INTERVIEWER

It has lately crossed my mind that being a champion or a genius is simply a matter of accident, like being born a grey horse instead of a brown horse.

KUNITZ

Talent is almost the cheapest thing we have. The question is one of character, alertness. I like a remark of Pasteur's: "Chance favors the ready mind."

INTERVIEWER

You've lived most of your life outside the poetry establishment. Do you consider yourself to be a part of it now? Has your attitude toward it changed?

KUNITZ

I wish I knew what the poetry establishment was. It's curious that nobody speaks of the fiction establishment. Poets don't get their rewards in the marketplace, so maybe they tend to take honors and prizes and the illusion of power much too seriously. There's a heavy accumulation of bile in that famous Pierian spring. Some poets seem to think they have to kill off their predecessors in order to make room for themselves. If you live long enough and receive a bit of recognition, you're bound to become a target. The only advantage of celebrity I can think of is that it puts one in a position to be of help to others. The phrase "community of poets" still has a sweet ring to me.

INTERVIEWER

For sheer good company, you seem to prefer painters to poets.

KUNITZ

I count myself lucky to be married into their world. I envy

them because there is so much physical satisfaction in the actual work of painting and sculpture. I'm a physical being and resent this sedentary business of sitting at one's desk and moving only one's wrists. I pace, I speak my poems, I get very kinetic when I'm working. Besides, I love the social and gregarious nature of painters. Poets tend to be nervous and competitive and introverted. My image of discomfort is three poets together in a room. My painter-friends—among them Kline and De Kooning and Rothko and Guston and Motherwell—were enacting an art of gesture to which I responded. When I insist on poetry as a kind of action, I'm thinking very much in these terms—every achieved metaphor in a poem is a gesture of sorts, the equivalent of the slashing of a stroke on canvas.

INTERVIEWER

You have produced some sculpture—wire sculpture and assemblages.

KUNITZ

Sometimes I feel I'm a sculptor *manqué*. I love working with my hands. In my garden, my woodworking. My hands want to make forms. Though my poems often deal with the time sense, I'm inclined to translate that into metaphors of space. I like to define my perimeters. I want to know where a poem is happening, its ground, its footing, how much room I have to move in.

INTERVIEWER

You organize a poem spatially?

KUNITZ

It's one of the ways a poem of mine gets organized. I follow the track of the eye—it's a track through space.

INTERVIEWER

The Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, which you helped start, would seem to be a reflection of your concern with making a community of artists and writers.

KUNITZ

Art withers without fellowship. I recall how grievously I missed the sense of a community in my own youth. In a typical American city or town poets are strangers. If our society provided a more satisfying cultural climate, a more spontaneous and generous environment, we shouldn't need to install specialized writing workshops in the universities or endow places like Yaddo or MacDowell or Provincetown. In Provincetown we invite a number of young writers and visual artists from all parts of the country to live at the Center for an extended period, working freely in association. Our policy is not to impose a pattern on them, but to let them create their own. In practice, instead of becoming competitive, they soon want to talk to one another about their work problems, they begin to share their manuscripts and paintings, they arrange their own group sessions, they meet visiting writers and artists and consult with them, if they are so inclined. Most who come for the seven-month term are loathe to leave. Many of them stay on as residents of the town.

INTERVIEWER

What about the situation in Iowa?

KUNITZ

Iowa has the reputation of producing a recognizable brand of poetry. Call it Corn Fed Surrealism. But it can't be wholly true, for I picked three Iowa graduates for the Yale Series of Younger Poets without having the faintest notion of their pedigree. Peter Klappert, Michael Ryan, Maura Stanton—they don't sound alike at all. In their case, certainly, talent overcame education.

INTERVIEWER

You've resigned this year from your editorship of the Yale Series?

KUNITZ

Yes. Eight years is long enough. Close to a thousand book-

length submissions a year. It's a heavy chore. The feeling at the Press was that it was time to appoint an editor who didn't have Eastern connections. I'm happy indeed that Dick Hugo is to be my successor. But I must add, to set the record straight, that out of my eight choices only three were Easterners. Coincidentally, here's this letter on my desk from Dick, out in Montana—it just came today. He says: "I used to think there was an 'Eastern Establishment' until I went East and found people far more critical of each other than we dare to be out here. If there ever is any 'Establishment,' chances are it will be Western, formed out of loneliness." It confirms what I said to you earlier on that subject.

INTERVIEWER

Can you comment on the quality of the work of young poets?

KUNITZ

I hate to generalize, but I'll make a stab at offering a few broad conclusions. My first and main observation is that no earlier generation has written so well, or in such numbers. But it's a generation without masters: dozens of poets are writing at the same level of accomplishment. My explanation is that what we're experiencing is the democratization of genius. It's also clear that few poets have much of anything to say. Practically the only exceptions are the liberated women, who have the authentic passion of a cause. It's no accident that my first five Yale selections were men, my last three female. Another point is that few young poets have mastered traditional prosody. The result is that they don't really know how to make language sing or move for them. There's a modicum of music in most of what's being written today. They're not testing their poems against the ear. They're writing for the page, and the page, let me tell you, is a cold bed.

INTERVIEWER

Among your recent work, "Three Floors" stands out for its musical effects.

KUNITZ

Studs Turkel, who interviewed me last fall in Chicago, told me it was one of his favorites. He had me read it while someone played *Warum* in the background—on tape, of course. A little corny, perhaps, but it was quite moving to hear that music, which I hadn't really heard since my childhood. I realized that I had actually written the poem to that melody. The poem goes back to more formal patterns. It's the only rhymed stanzaic poem in *The Testing-Tree*. And not because I planned it that way, but simply because it came to me that way. It would have been a lie to force it into a different mode. You have to trust the way a poem comes to you. I don't expect it to happen, but I don't negate the possibility of my returning to a more formal verse tradition.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you suppose many young writers are almost embarrassed to write a poem in rhyme or metrics?

KUNITZ

Modern poetry begins for them with Williams and Pound (of the *Cantos*) and Olson and Ginsberg and Creeley—and they don't want to sound old-fashioned. It's a matter of conditioning. Furthermore, they see no reason why poetry should be difficult to write; they want it to be easy.

INTERVIEWER

Literary tradition has accumulated suspicions about the sincerity of any poet's feelings toward conventional subjects. There are certain poems of yours that seem oblivious to this. A poem like "Robin Redbreast"—until its ending—seems to strain sentimentally after the large problem of being a little bird, though its end is so powerful—when the robin is picked up, the poet sees the blue sky through a bullet hole in his head—that I am ashamed of my reaction to the earlier part of the poem.

KUNITZ

Maybe you're confusing pathos with sentimentality. My

reverence for the chain of being is equivalent to a religious conviction. I don't apologize for my strong feelings about birds and beasts. Was Blake being sentimental when he wrote, "A robin redbreast in a cage/ Puts all Heaven in a rage," or "A dog starv'd at his master's gate/ Predicts the ruin of the state"?

INTERVIEWER

Often your poems deal with dreams.

KUNITZ

Often a poem *is* a dream, but I don't necessarily say it is.

INTERVIEWER

Are there any specific poems that come to mind?

KUNITZ

The one that first occurs to me is "Open the Gates." It begins with a vision of the city of the burning cloud. Like Sodom and Gomorrah—cities of the plain. Those images of dragging my life behind me and knocking on the door and the rest of it are straight out of dream. I woke at the moment of revelation, just when the gates were opening. Another source of that poem may be the Doré illustrations to Dante's *Inferno*, one of the magic books of my childhood. My images usually have an experiential root. In "The Testing-Tree" the image of my mother in the last section, the dream passage, goes back to a conversation with her in her eighties. She told me she had a proposal of marriage from a man of about the same age. He thought they should live out their lives together and take her off my hands; it was a practical thing. I asked her: "Do you really care for him?" She shook her head. "You know there are only two old men I have any use for. One's Bernard Shaw and the other is Bertrand Russell." She meant that. Another image in that same section is of a sputtering Model A that "unfurled a highway behind/ where the tanks maneuver,/ revolving their turrets." In '45, after my discharge from the army, I drove a Model A cross-country, stopping on the way at a little oasis in the middle of the desert called Silver Springs. A few days later I

pushed on to the West coast. Several years later I drove back from the University of Washington where I'd been visiting poet. I took the route through Death Valley into Nevada to see my oasis. When I approached, armed guards appeared from every side and ordered me away. It turned out that the place was now Yucca Flats, the testing ground of the atom bomb. This is all curiously in the background of the poem, somewhat mysteriously translated. And the lines about "in a murderous time": I wrote those lines the night that Martin Luther King was assassinated. I had been working on the poem for weeks, but couldn't get the ending right. I was visiting Yale at that time, reading manuscripts for the Yale Series, and staying with R.W.B. Lewis, an old friend of mine. We were listening to the radio when we heard about the assassination of King, with whom I had been associated, raising money for the civil rights movement. Suddenly, as I sat listening to the announcement, the lines I needed came to me.

INTERVIEWER

What is the source for the imagery of depreciation toward the end of this poem, such as the "cardboard doorway"?

KUNITZ

I see a movie set, furnished with memories like studio props. Doorways figure largely throughout the poem—entrances into my past, into the woods, into truth itself. I had recently gone back to Worcester to receive an honorary degree from Clark University and had asked to be taken to the scenes of my childhood. The nettled field had changed into a housing development, the path into the woods had become an express highway, and the woods themselves were gone. That's where the poem began, with the thought that reality itself is dissolving all around us.

INTERVIEWER

You indicate that with images pasted together like a collage?

KUNITZ

A montage, I would say.

INTERVIEWER

Can you say something about the arrangement of the lines for this poem?

KUNITZ

I started working with flush margins, and had difficulty achieving any sort of linear tension. Furthermore, I found the look of the page uninteresting, that long poem with all those short lines. I didn't develop a triadic sense until I began tinkering with the lines, as I often do at the beginning of a poem, trying to find the formal structure. The moment I hit on the tercets, the poem began to move.

INTERVIEWER

I am impressed by your capacity to break the tone abruptly or to shift the voice in a poem. Sometimes it is only for a line, but these outbreaks seem to have an idiosyncratic dramatic function.

KUNITZ

It's something I may have learned from working with dramatic monologues. In an extended passage I sense the need for an interruption of the speech-flow, another kind of voice breaking into the poem and altering its course. I recall one occasion when I was hunting for a phrase to do just that, so that I could push the poem one step further, beyond its natural climax. My inability to achieve the right tone infuriated me. I must have tried thirty different versions, none of which worked. I was ready to beat my head on the wall when I heard myself saying, "Let be! Let be!" And there it was, simple and perfect—I had my line. If you have a dialectical mind like mine and if a poem of yours is moving more or less compulsively toward its destination, you feel the need of a pistol shot to stop the action, so that it may resume on another track, in a different mood or tempo. One of the reasons I write poems is that they make revelation possible. I sometimes think I ought to spend the rest of my life writing a single poem whose action reaches an epiphany only at the point of exhaustion, in the combustion of the whole life, and continues and renews, until it blows away

like a puff of milkweed. Anybody who remains a poet throughout a lifetime, who is still a poet let us say at sixty, has a terrible will to survive. He has already died a million times and at a certain age he faces this imperative need to be reborn. All the phenomena of his life, all the memories, all the stuff that makes him feel himself, is re-materialized and re-blended. He's capable of perpetuation, he turns up again in new shapes. Any poem he writes could be a hundred poems. He could take a poem written at twenty or thirty and re-experience it and come out again with something absolutely different and probably richer. He can't excuse himself by saying he has written everything he has to write. That's a damn lie. He's swamped with material, it's overwhelming.

INTERVIEWER

What are your thoughts on the way you end a poem?

KUNITZ

My sense of the poem is rather classic. I think of a beginning, a middle and an end. I don't believe in open form. A poem may be open, but then it doesn't have form. Merely to stop a poem is not to end it. I don't want to suggest that I believe in neat little resolutions. To put a logical cap on a poem is to suffocate its original impulse. Just as the truly great piece of architecture moves beyond itself into its environment, into the landscape and the sky, so the kind of poetic closure that interests me bleeds out of its ending into the whole universe of feeling and thought. I like an ending that's both a door and a window.

INTERVIEWER

Your poems are packed; they have a weight. To me, it is a question of scale.

KUNITZ

Thanks. I've heard the opposite reaction, that my poems are too heavy. One critic wrote quite recently that my poems sounded as though they had been translated from the Hungarian. I don't know why, but somehow that made me feel quite light-hearted.

INTERVIEWER

Most of your poems are written in a high style.

KUNITZ

That used to be truer than it is today. I've tried to squeeze the water out of my poems.

INTERVIEWER

Is the elimination of understood words or definite or indefinite articles a feature of your aesthetic?

KUNITZ

I don't usually eliminate articles, definite or indefinite, but I've grown more and more committed to an economy of means.

INTERVIEWER

Mostly in your earlier poetry you have a stylistic habit of animating abstractions by hinging them to metaphors, as in the "bone of mercy" or the "lintel of my brain."

KUNITZ

There's some confusion about this type of prepositional construction. When it has weak specification, when it incorporates a loose abstraction, it is a stylistic vice, and I've grown increasingly wary of it. I resist phrases like "stars of glory." But when I say "the broad lintel of his brain," I am perceiving the brain as a house. The brain is not, in this usage, an abstraction. It's just as real as the lintel. Pound was the first, I think, to define this particular stylistic vice, and modern criticism has blindly followed suit, without bothering to make the necessary discriminations. In any event, I don't accept arbitrary rules about poetry. Do you want to try me with another example?

INTERVIEWER

Take a phrase like "the calcium snows of sleep."

KUNITZ

I like it, though I'm not the one who should be saying so. It's

fresh and it happens to be true, scientifically true. During sleep the brain deposits calcium at a faster rate than when it's conscious. Besides, the "snows of sleep" have nothing in common with the "stars of glory." The construction is legitimately possessive, analogous to the "snows of the Russian plains." Sleep is where the snow is falling.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have a reading knowledge of Russian?

KUNITZ

No. I've described the method of these translations in the introduction to the Akhmatova volume. If I didn't have someone to help me with the Russian text, I would certainly be lost. I've worked mostly with Max Hayward, who understands what I want from him. I not only want a word by word translation, in the exact word order, but any kind of gloss that would be helpful to me, such as the meanings of a word's roots. The root sense of a word may supplement, or even contradict, its current usage. Etymology is one of my passions. I like to use a word in a poem with its whole history dragging like a chain behind it. Whether or not anybody else understands it doesn't really concern me. The word to me has a particular weight and historic validity. In the same way, I try to get from Max as much etymological information as I can. And then we go over the sound. We read the poems aloud. I translate only when I feel I have some affinity with the poet. Even with respect to a poet I don't feel particularly close to—Yevtushenko for example—when I was asked to translate some of his poems, I fastened on to some of his early lyrics, which are among the best poems he's written.

INTERVIEWER

What is the affinity you feel with Voznesensky?

KUNITZ

It was Voznesensky who got me started with the Russians. Andrei came to this country in the sixties and we met and had a good feeling about each other. How can I explain these things? He wanted me to translate him and I felt I could do it—again,

selecting the poems that I wanted to translate. I enjoyed doing it, and I learned something too. Every poet I've ever translated has taught me something. One of the perils of poetry is to be trapped in the skin of your own imagination and to remain there all your life. Translation lets you crack your own skin and enter the skin of another. You identify with somebody else's imagination and rhythm, and that makes it possible for you to become other. It's an opening towards transformation and renewal. I wish I could translate from all the languages. If I could live forever, I'd do that.

INTERVIEWER

Many of the Russian poets you've known personally. Do you feel different about Baudelaire, whom you know only through his work?

KUNITZ

I know Baudelaire too—he was dealing with exactly the kind of issues that concern me. Problems of good and evil, the sexual drama. As a young man I was attracted to the violence of his inner life, the force of his rhetoric, and the hard structure of his poems, the way they build and make such a solidity of thought and image and feeling. In a poem like "Rover" I am very aware of my debt to him. The life of a poet is crystallized in his work, that's how you know him. Akhmatova I never met. She died in '66 and I never encountered her, but she's an old friend of mine in spirit. She taught me something, taught me the possibility of dealing quite directly with the most painful experiences.

INTERVIEWER

You are referring to the execution of her husband and the imprisonment of her son, as well as the government repression of her poetry?

KUNITZ

Requiem 1935–40 is a good example. The background of the poem was excruciating, and yet out of it she made a poem that

is personal at its immediate level but universal in its ultimate form. It transcends the personal by viewing the historic occasion through the lens of individual suffering. Nothing is diminished in her poems: all her adversities and humiliations. She wrote with such burning and scrupulous intensity that she became part of the historic process itself—its conscience and its voice.

INTERVIEWER

Do you envy the disasters of other poets, even if those disasters lack the historical dimension of Akhmatova's?

KUNITZ

Sufficient unto each poet are his own disasters! The victims of history have a certain grandeur. One saves one's tears for those who fall victim to themselves. Their cries lacerate us. I'm thinking of Berryman, Sexton, Plath. . . . Perhaps it is in the nature of our age to be most moved by poems born of weakness rather than of strength. All the same, I yearn for an art capable of overriding the shames, the betrayals, the lies; capable of building something shining and great out of the ruins. The poets that seem most symptomatic of the modern world are poets without what Keats called Negative Capability. They do not flow into others. The flow of their pity is inward rather than outward. They are self-immersed and self-destroying. And when they kill themselves, we love them most. That says something about our age.

INTERVIEWER

The tragic sense no longer seems pertinent to our lives.

KUNITZ

The tragic sense cannot exist without tradition and structure, the communal bond. The big machines of industry and state are unaffected by our little fates. All the aggrandizement of the ego in the modern world seems a rather frivolous enterprise, unattached to anything larger than itself. Number 85374 on the assembly line may have a life important to himself and his

family, but when he reaches sixty-five and is forced out of the line, another number steps in and takes his place—and it doesn't make any difference. The artist in the modern world is probably the only person, with a handful of exceptions, who keeps alive that sense of the sharing of his life with others. When he watches that leaf fall, it's falling for you. Or that sparrow fall—

INTERVIEWER

The most difficult thing is that the adversary does not inspire confrontation. Evil has lost its cape and sharp horns. Hitler was evil but he was not a Satanic figure.

KUNITZ

The opportunity for confrontation with evil was greater in an earlier age. It becomes more and more difficult to intercede in behalf of one's own fate. The overwhelming technological superiority of the military apparatus protects the tyrant, as an emblem of evil, from his people. As Pastor Bonhoeffer learned, you cannot get at evil in the world. I've written about his moral dilemma when he joined the plot to assassinate Hitler. Evil has become a product of manufacture, it is built into our whole industrial and political system, it is being manufactured every day, it is rolling off the assembly lines, it is being sold in the stores, it pollutes the air. And it's not a person!

Perhaps the way to cope with the adversary is to confront him in ourselves. We have to fight for our little bit of health. We have to make our living and dying important again. And the living and dying of others. Isn't that what poetry is about?

—Chris Busa

The Bergen-Belsen Banquet

Norman Kotker

Every October Chaim Fogel went to the Bergen-Belsen Survivors' Banquet at the Plaza or at the Pierre. Naturally, he preferred the Plaza, because of the hors d'oeuvres: avocado appetizers, little cubes with fresh ground pepper on them and an outstanding Italian dressing. What did he care if the survivors crowded around the hors d'oeuvre table, a mob pushing furiously against each other to reach for a serving of smoked salmon with capers or *pâté en croûte*, just the way they had pushed in the camp trying to get a spoonful of potato peel soup. It didn't shame him. The irony wasn't lost on him. It pleased him to see the people milling around, their mouths continually moving; either they were talking or they were chewing. He liked to look at the women, at their dresses: low-cut, high-cut, tight, loose; purple, glassy-green, yellow, various reds; chiffons, prints, red-white-and-blue. He liked the rooms the banquet was held in: mirrors on the wall, cherubs on the ceiling, frescoes, gilt, rococo mantelpieces, baroque chandeliers. He liked to look at the number of things in the room, what God had made: Jews,

waiters, chairs, tables, chandeliers, salmons, glasses, ice cubes with their short, glittering lives, bottles of liquor, matchbooks, matches, flames, cigarettes, cigarette ashes—it was as if each hair on his head was numbered and accounted for. It satisfied him. Immensely.

But one summer day as he rode in from White Plains on the morning train, he turned to his friend Broitman who was sitting next to him, also a survivor, and said, “This year I won’t go.”

“Why not?” Broitman was indignant. “Why not? You have to go.”

“To come into the city.” A whimper. Fogel was a small-boned man, stunted; he would never look suburban. “A late night. To find a parking space. So much traffic, even on weekends.” Although Fogel’s wife, Lillian, had already purchased her outfit, a new dress, Bloomingdale’s White Plains, \$130.

“What are you talking about?” Broitman golfed. He had an American suntan. A coat manufacturer, he had in certain years hired a car with a driver just for the evening to take him to the Plaza or the Pierre. “Don’t be stupid. You shouldn’t miss it. This year,” he leaned closer to Fogel, heavily, “they’re going to have a cake with a naked girl jumping out of it.”

Jokes. Jokes. The Bergen-Belsen banquet, it always gave rise to jokes.

Why? Because who, even among those who attended it, could ever believe that the survivors actually held a banquet? Though there was a report of it every year, very solemn, on one of the back pages of the *Times*. A sociologist had done a study: when readers saw the news item, they giggled. Unbelievable! Also disgusting. Vulgar. Blasphemous.

So what! No one had believed that the camps had existed either.

A joke:

There were these two survivors who encountered each other at the banquet after twenty years; in the camp they had been reduced (ha ha!) to cannibalism. They met at the hors d’oeuvre table. “You’ve gained a lot of weight,” said A. “It’s my job,” said B. “I’m a tester.”

"What do you test?"

"Cookbooks."

"Wonderful! A far cry from the old days."

"Not so much. My next book is: *What to Cook When There's Nothing to Eat in the House.*"

Then there was the song Fogel's children had made up. Once he had heard them. He was sorry he had to shout to make them stop. Little Americans, what did they know yet? A cowboy song. "We're heading for the last roundup. Git along, git along. Headin' for Bergen-Belsen. A-singing a song." He and his wife, not a survivor, American-born, had been getting dressed to go out. The children were eight, ten, clever; they meant no harm. That's what children are for—they make fun.

"I'm not going," said Fogel. "I'm through. This year finished. All over. Kaput. That's it. Thumbs down."

"You'll change your mind," Broitman said as the train slid to a stop somewhere in the South Bronx.

An empty view. Ruined tenements, deserted lots covered with smashed bricks, here and there a wall half knocked over. Desolation. Fogel was sorry he had a window seat. How long would they have to wait there? Would the air conditioning go off? They'd suffocate.

"Never! Never! I'm through. I'm finished. I said it."

A personal statement. The revolt of the individual.

Fine! Lovely! But would he show up there?

"I'm through, I'm through, I'm through," he said to his wife a couple of weeks later. The invitation had come in the mail. "I'm through."

"What do you mean, you're through? How can you be through?" She picked up the invitation from the kitchen counter where the mail was kept and handed it to him aggressively. "This year the Plaza. What's better?"

"I always liked the Plaza," Fogel admitted. Without reading it, he firmly put the invitation back on the kitchen counter. Recently he had been very busy, working hard; he was preparing a new course. NYU Downtown. Almost no one took his "The Enlightenment" anymore. He had refused to change the name of the course to "The Dawn of the Revolution." Now

even his "Introduction to Modern Europe" was losing enrollment. He was afraid they would drop him. What did tenure mean these days? "The Person in History" was what he was working up, or "The Person, Past and Present." Sometimes he thought it might be safest just to call it "The Person."

Was that why their sex life was deteriorating? Because he was so worried?

His son Steven was doing graduate work in California—in Cool Media. Marlene, his daughter, was at Boston University getting an M.A. in The Urban Experience.

With a contemptuous look at his wife, he went out into the yard to coil the garden hose. "Forget it," he said as he opened the kitchen door to walk out. "I'm through going. I'm through. Don't waste a postage stamp. Put the money in the bank, it will come in handy for your old age." He turned around and held his right arm out stiffly. "See! Finished! Rigor mortis." He let the screen door slam loudly behind him.

But it was apparent, the next day she would RSVP: Will attend, Mr. and Mrs. Chaim Fogel. Number of Persons in Party: 2. And would enclose a check for \$37.50. The price had gone up. But it didn't pay for a meal like that, not to mention drinks. The extra was paid for by a philanthropist, also a survivor.

So they went. "Aha, Fogel, I knew you would show up," Broitman said.

Fogel was nibbling a frank in a blanket. He felt a little better. "The Person Past and Present" it was; he had already seen the galley proofs of the next catalogue. "'The Person Past and Present,' Professor Fogel," it said. His wife was wearing a dress made out of silver material, but in good taste. With it she wore silver shoes. A nice color, it might indicate something favorable about his professional future. Some women were wearing dresses made out of gold. Businessmen's wives. When they moved, gold moved. He looked around to see if there were any other academics in the crowd. Unfortunately, the only ones he recognized were merely in Yiddish studies.

His own appearance also was acceptable. He was wearing a

dark blue suit, 100% wool. His necktie was Italian silk, weighted, blue and silver. He could feel it snug around his neck. He could feel his black leather belt around his waist, his shining black shoes protecting his feet. The cattle, the silkworms, the sheep, they were dead. He was alive, drawing breath.

Occasionally people broke down at these affairs, at least one each year. Not just tears, men groaning, holding their foreheads in one hand, rocking from side to side; not just overdrinking, too much avocado, the fatty part of the duck and then after an hour of dancing horas or cha-chas, vomiting—if they were lucky in the men's room, if not, as once happened, on the dance floor; not just that, but real breakdowns. One time a woman weeping, shrieking, had to be dragged out of the room. One time somebody, one of the organizers of the affair, a big contributor, a man sitting at the head table on the double dais, was slapped by another survivor, a woman. One time two men started fighting, fists, in the middle of the floor. Fogel didn't think he would break down. Now—it was time—he wanted to treat the whole thing lightly: the Jews weren't the only people who had suffered. Look at all the people who had been tortured by their own parents; he knew of some cases. He had one colleague at NYU whose mother had made her eat dogfood when she was a child; he knew someone else whose father and mother both had called him nothing but "Stinks"—even after he had grown up. He knew a man who worked for his father, in plastics, a big factory; all he did for twenty years was sweep the floor. "Schmuck, that's all you can do!" the father said. He knew addicts. He knew lesbians. These people also were lucky if they got out of it alive. Did they hold banquets?

His wife was not in sight any more. He pushed through the crowd to look for her. Mostly survivors or survivors' mates, not many others. All people past middle age, tired, suspicious looking. But his wife couldn't be seen, not even her reflection in the gilt-framed mirrors on the wall. By the time he found her they would be reading the necrology already; they would be announcing the prize for the best concentration camp book of

the year; or, even worse, reading excerpts from it, fifteen minutes, lights dimmed, no noise but the subdued voice of the reader and the tiptoeing of the black waiters bringing in the *bombe glacée* and after-dinner mints.

He found her at table number sixteen, talking to Broitman's wife, also an American.

"Is it fancy enough for you?" Broitman's wife asked. "It's fancy enough for me."

This year each table had as a floral centerpiece an Israeli flag, blue and white, made of carnations. Above the head table on the wall was another floral arrangement: the words BERGEN-BELSEN in red roses on a ground of white carnations and beneath it, in Hebrew and English, the word REMEMBER.

"It must have cost a fortune!" Fogel's wife approved. Shy before her marriage, a published poet in the Hunter College literary magazine, she had rarely ventured to inspect the tattooed numbers on his arm; they made her too uneasy. For a time after they had met, one year, two years (which included the first months of their marriage), they had discussed the camp obsessively—on dates, in bed, walking on Fordham Road, everywhere. She had held his head in her arms and he cried. Sometimes it was the other way around, she cried: Man's Inhumanity to Man—who could bear it!

He could bear it. He had borne it. "It's beautiful," he said to Mrs. Broitman. "How do they get the flowers blue? Do they grow that way? A variation?" He sat down beside his wife on the side away from the Broitmans. He didn't know who would be sitting next to him. They hadn't arranged a table. Whoever would come would sit there, catch as catch can. He knew idioms.

The music stopped for a moment, a gasp; then it transformed itself into a flourish. The urgent voice of the M.C. came charging over it. "This is it, dinner is served, ladies and gentlemen, please go to your tables. No lagging."

The crowd formed into little battalions. So many of them were plump. They settled obediently into their gold-backed, plush-upholstered chairs. "God, I'm starving," Fogel's wife said.

He patted her arm. He himself was not hungry at all.

The first course was fresh fruit cup with sherbet, nothing fancy. But at the Plaza, fresh fruit cup means fresh, and not all citrus fruits either. Broitman's wife pointed this out.

"Mine has a piece of honeydew melon in it," Broitman said. He exhaled contentedly. "But it's too bad the sherbet is lime, not orange."

"I prefer lime," Lillian said. "It's more unusual."

The next course was *purée mongole*. Fogel took a spoonful. Then he stopped eating. He put his spoon down. He could feel the metallic taste of the spoon on the side of his tongue.

"What's the matter? Why aren't you eating it?" His wife sounded relaxed, but she sat stiffly with her bosom close to the table because she was afraid of spilling on her new silver dress.

"I don't want to stuff myself." Fogel suffered from chest pains, heartburn; cucumbers, mushrooms, melon—all these brought him grief. Tonight he was afraid it would happen again. Sometimes he felt it was bad enough to kill him.

"Don't you like it? I love it." Lillian was an enthusiast of international cooking: She made shrimp curries with shredded coconut; she made *boeuf bourguignon*, lasagna. She owned *The United Nations Cookbook*. The proceeds went toward international peace. "It's delicious," she said happily. "I wouldn't dare make it at home."

"Let someone in the kitchen eat it. Give it to the waiters. Let them put it in a dog bag for you, you can take it home."

Quenelles were the next course. They were served with wine. Fogel drank the wine and took a little taste of the fish. Around the table the topic of conversation was this: It looks like gefilte fish; it tastes like gefilte fish, though with less flavor; but it isn't gefilte fish. "Quenelles," Lillian said, drawing out the word to the full, leaving the final e dangling. She had once made them, though they hadn't come out so light. Then Fogel had eaten several servings. This time he wasn't eating at all. "How much did you drink?" she whispered.

"Only one."

"I hate to see it go to waste." As soon as she finished her fish, she deftly transferred plates, with a little wink at Mrs. Broit-

man, and ate Fogel's serving too.

Fogel stood up. A chest pain.

"Where are you going?"

"I'll be back in a minute."

"Are you all right?"

"I'll be back in a minute." The room was too big, high-ceilinged. A painted box with survivors scattered across the bottom. He almost ran out of it, dodging among the tables, bumping against a waiter carrying a loaded tray, Roast Long Island Duckling, Montmorency. The waiter caught his balance, juggled the tray, steadied it; the dishes didn't spill on the carpeted floor; the ducklings were not wasted; they did not die in vain.

Outside the room, the lobby. Made of marble. The chairs were tapestry; the ceiling, gilt plaster. Three rich women walked by—de la Renta, an Oscar de la Renta dress on one, Dior, Halston, one of those, an original. Too much. There was too much here, layer upon layer upon layer. He was tired of New York, he wanted something simpler: green, light, old-fashioned, the wooden towns he had seen in his childhood, living ducks, living birds, air.

He walked out of the front door of the Plaza past the uniformed guard. A prison, but this time with waiters. With smoked salmon, duckling. All the mattresses and pillows, room service, three meals a day, Plaza meals. For the survivors, would it be enough? The park was what he needed. There was a duck pond down there, a little bridge. Nature. Simplicity. A garden. Trees and water. Air. Eden.

But now it was all black. Black trees arched over his head. A black path led down toward the water. It was so dark the path looked clean. But was it safe? He didn't dare walk on it. A man who had survived Bergen-Belsen, why should he be afraid? Why should it matter to him?

He hurried away from the park entrance, back to the street, the public sidewalk, Central Park South, a fine place, airy also. He could lean on the stone wall and look down on the park. The cars driving behind him, the lights of the Plaza—these made him feel calm. But not his stomach, not the region near

his heart. He was worried: Would he throw up his quenelle, his one bite, over the wall into the park?

Nothing was enough. It wasn't enough. All the avocados, all the silks, all the music, all the women, all the reds, the silvers, the \$37.50's a couple, all the *bombes glacées*—it wasn't enough. It was too much. For anybody, for any person in history, it wasn't enough. He leaned over the stone wall, tears came out of his eyes, he began to gag. He choked and caught himself; he spat. Then he sensed it; then he felt it; then he could see it: a black man was walking along the sidewalk toward him, tall and shabby, a football player, a basketball player. An ominous sight. He was coming closer. Quick, Fogel, back to the Plaza! One mugging, and finished! Who would know, who would care? Who was listening, who was watching? Again the Twentieth century rushes by while a man is getting killed—again Volkswagens; this time also Cadillacs. Black, approaching closer, whatever he asks, give. Better a coward than a brave man! How else did the Jews survive for so many centuries? This is the Urban Experience!

Hurriedly Fogel pushed his hand into his pocket. Too much, more than enough, too much, his insides were disappearing. Once again he felt himself gagging. He caught his breath. Out of his pocket he pulled his handkerchief and spat into it, once to get the taste out of his mouth and then twice more—three for good luck, a grandmother's superstition, foolish. Cautiously, he turned his head to look over his shoulder. The black man wasn't to be seen. No mugger, no kapo, no Nazi, no killer, no Totenkopf.

But he felt dead. His mouth tasted of iron; there seemed to be a band of metal around the root of his tongue. With his hand pressed against his head, he leaned against the park wall, perhaps for five minutes, perhaps for two minutes. There was such a thing as a heart attack. Was there also such a thing as a head attack? Below him, in the duck pond, black waters flowed. Graveyard words flowed in his head: *Yisgadal. Yisgadash.*

Bracing himself against the wall, Fogel exhaled and then slowly turned to face the Plaza. With his handkerchief, he dabbed at his shirt and brushed his jacket lapels.

In the Plaza's glittering, bone-white men's room, he rinsed out his mouth. He washed his face.

When he got back to his table, coffee had already been served. The lights had dimmed. The necrology was being read.

"WHERE WERE YOU?" A frantic whisper from his wife. "I sent Broitman after you to the men's room, but you didn't answer."

"Sh!" Fogel said. "Sh!"

So many survivors had died this year. It was a bad year. The necrology rolled on, five minutes, ten minutes, the M.C., his voice swollen with portentousness, reading off the names. They traveled through the coils of the microphone, through the wires to the speaker system, and out, metallic, disintegrating into waves, into the air of the Plaza to mix with its food smells and its perfumes.

"June 23: Hannah Kalb, North Miami Beach, Florida, age 72; originally Czernowitz. July 1: Herschel Zussman, Rego Park, age 58; originally Lodz."

"Are you all right? Where did you go?" Fogel's wife was staring at him.

"Quiet!"

"Are you all RIGHT?"

"I'm trying to listen."

Here, with this group, the necrology was unusual. It wasn't alphabetical; it was by date of death. Perhaps they didn't know which alphabet to use. Perhaps they despaired of finding the proper order for names like these—Polish, Rumanian, Czech—beginning sometimes SZ, sometimes SH, sometimes TS, sometimes Z. So they did it by date. That also seemed appropriate. Days had retained their identities in the camp; people had not.

"September 4." Very softly the band behind the M.C.'s rich voice played Beethoven's funeral march. "Walter Frucht, Maplewood, New Jersey, age 68. September 23, Yom Kippur, ladies and gentlemen, Eva Weintraub of Manhattan, age 60. Originally Czernowitz also. A very pious woman."

He was getting up toward October 15, this day. Fogel put his hand on his neck, but his fingers had no feeling. The pain in his head had gone away. Its disappearance frightened him. He

didn't know if he was sitting down or standing up; he could be lying stretched out with candles at his head and at his feet.

"September 25: Frieda Shoff.

"October 8: Szymon Soless.

"October 9: Pittel Gewirtz."

Or with a black prayer book placed in his hand.

"October 11: Herman Asch, Forest Hills."

Or a white flower.

"And just today. Just today, ladies and gentlemen. Just today. October 15."

Wildly Fogel reached out to hold onto something, to the side of the table, to the chair. He knocked a knife down. It went clattering to the floor.

His wife whipped around, she put her hand on his face.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have just received word of the sudden passing of another survivor." The M.C. made his voice especially somber: a death so fresh. "October 15."

"Just today."

Fogel squeezed his wife's arm tight with all his strength.

"Theodore Mell of Kew Gardens, originally Warsaw."

Fogel's breath escaped out of him, a rattling gasp. Slowly, with effort, he unclamped his stiff fingers, he let go of his wife's arm.

So it was enough.

His name hadn't been called.

So it was enough. The others: they were enough.

Fogel tumbled forward to lean against the table. His arms pushed against coffee cups, against a bonbon dish. He lay his head down on the table, he started to cry.

All the Jews, mourners, scattered across the room, stood up in the dim light to begin the recitation of the mourner's prayer, the master of ceremonies resonantly calling out the first words: Magnified and sanctified! Magnified and sanctified be the Great Name of the Lord! Only Fogel, crying, his fist against his eyes, he was the only one, only he didn't stand up.

That's the way it was every year. Always, there were one or two who couldn't bring themselves to stand up and praise God.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

Andrei Codrescu's *Selected Poems* is forthcoming from Sun Books in May. City Lights will publish his new novel in September. "Samba de Los Agentes" has been condensed slightly from its original version.

Norman Kotker lives in Northhampton, Massachusetts. His most recent novel is *Miss Rhode Island*, published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux. "The Bergen-Belsen Banquet," written first as a story, has been expanded into a novel about a concentration camp survivor. The novel, called *Headaches*, will be coming out next year.

Robert Shacochis is currently a teaching-writing fellow at the Iowa Writers' Workshop and a recipient of a 1982 NEA grant. Short stories by Mr. Shacochis are forthcoming in *Playboy* and *Esquire* this summer.

Susan Welch lives in Minnesota and is at work on a novel. "The Time, The Place, The Loved One" is her first published story.

POETRY

Poems by **Gerald Stern** are forthcoming in *Poetry*, *American Poetry Review*, *MSS.* and *Antaeus*. His most recent collection of poems is *The Red Coal* (Houghton Mifflin).

INTERVIEWS

Sven Birkerts works at the Harvard Book Store in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He has published appreciations of Musil, Cendrars, Lowry, and Walcott. An essay on the prose of Osip Mandelstam is forthcoming in *Iowa Review*.

Chris Busa lives and writes in Provincetown.

ART

Jane Kaplowitz was born in New York in 1949. Her paintings and drawings have been included in recent exhibitions at Frank Kolbert Gallery, New York, and The Drawing Center, New York.

Harvey Mudd was born in Los Angeles and lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico. *The Plain of Smokes* was published in 1981 by Arabesque Books, Santa Barbara, in an edition that includes 30 original serigraph prints by Ken Price. Mudd has published two previous books of poetry, including *Soul Slot: Poems 1960-1973* (Second Porcupine Press).

Ken Price was born in Los Angeles in 1935 and currently lives in Taos, New Mexico. His sculpture and drawings have been shown extensively in the United States and Europe, including one-man exhibitions at the Whitney Museum, New York, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, James Corcoran Gallery, Los Angeles, and Willard Gallery, New York.

David Salle was born in Norman, Oklahoma, in 1952, and lives in New York. His paintings have been included in recent exhibitions at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and in one-man exhibitions at Galerie Bischofberger, Zurich, Mary Boone Gallery, New York, and Leo Castelli Gallery, New York.

FEATURE

Eileen Simpson is a psychotherapist and writer who lives in New York City. Her novel, *The Maze*, appeared in 1975. *Poets in their Youth*, from which "Damariscotta Mills" is excerpted, will be published by Random House in May.

ERRATA

A footnote to Dotson Rader's interview with Tennessee Williams in the Fall 1981 issue of *The Paris Review* (No. 81) incorrectly stated that Donald Windham's libel suit against Dotson Rader for his July 1978 article in *London Magazine*, "The Private Letters of Tennessee Williams," was settled out of court. In matter of fact, Windham's libel suit against *London Magazine* was settled with a Statement in Open Court made at the Queen's Bench Division in the High Court of Justice in London, England, on November 28, 1980. Earlier, a judgment against Rader in default of Appearance had been

signed at the same court on August 30, 1979, Rader having been served in the United States, out of the jurisdiction of the English Courts, and not having responded. At the Statement in Open Court, the Plaintiff's Counsel and the Counsel for the two other Defendants, *London Magazine* and its editor Alan Ross, agreed that Rader's article was "highly defamatory of Mr. Windham" and its scandalous allegations "without any foundation whatever." The Defendants' Counsel further stated that his clients greatly regretted they had allowed the article to be published, apologised for having published it, and agreed to print an article in the magazine setting out the facts in greater detail than was possible in the Court Statement. They also undertook to indemnify Windham in respect of his costs and to pay all other Court and legal fees, an aggregate sum which Mr. Ross has identified as £7,000. The Court Statements and the detailed refutation of Rader's libels are published in the Feb/March 1981 issue of *London Magazine*, pp. 80-88.

The Paris Review regrets the following errors in the interview with Gabriel García Márquez, issue #82: The correct name of the Colombian newspaper mentioned on p. 45 is *El Espectador*. Lines 9—11, p. 62, should read, "Faulkner had a reputation of being a drunkard, but in every interview that he gave he said that it was impossible to write one line when drunk." Faulkner was not interviewed by García Márquez himself, as was erroneously suggested.

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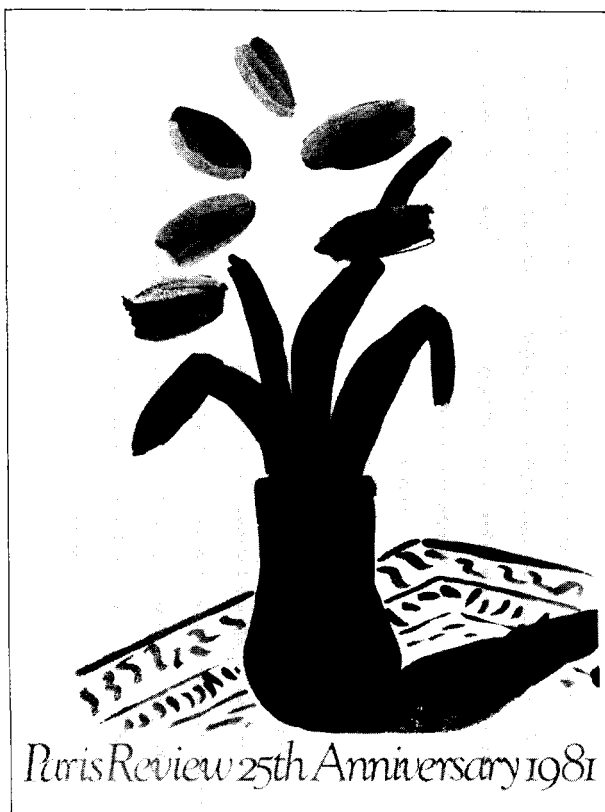
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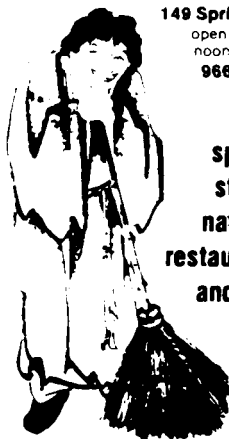
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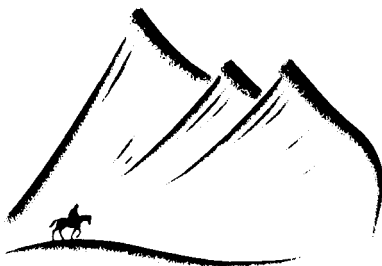
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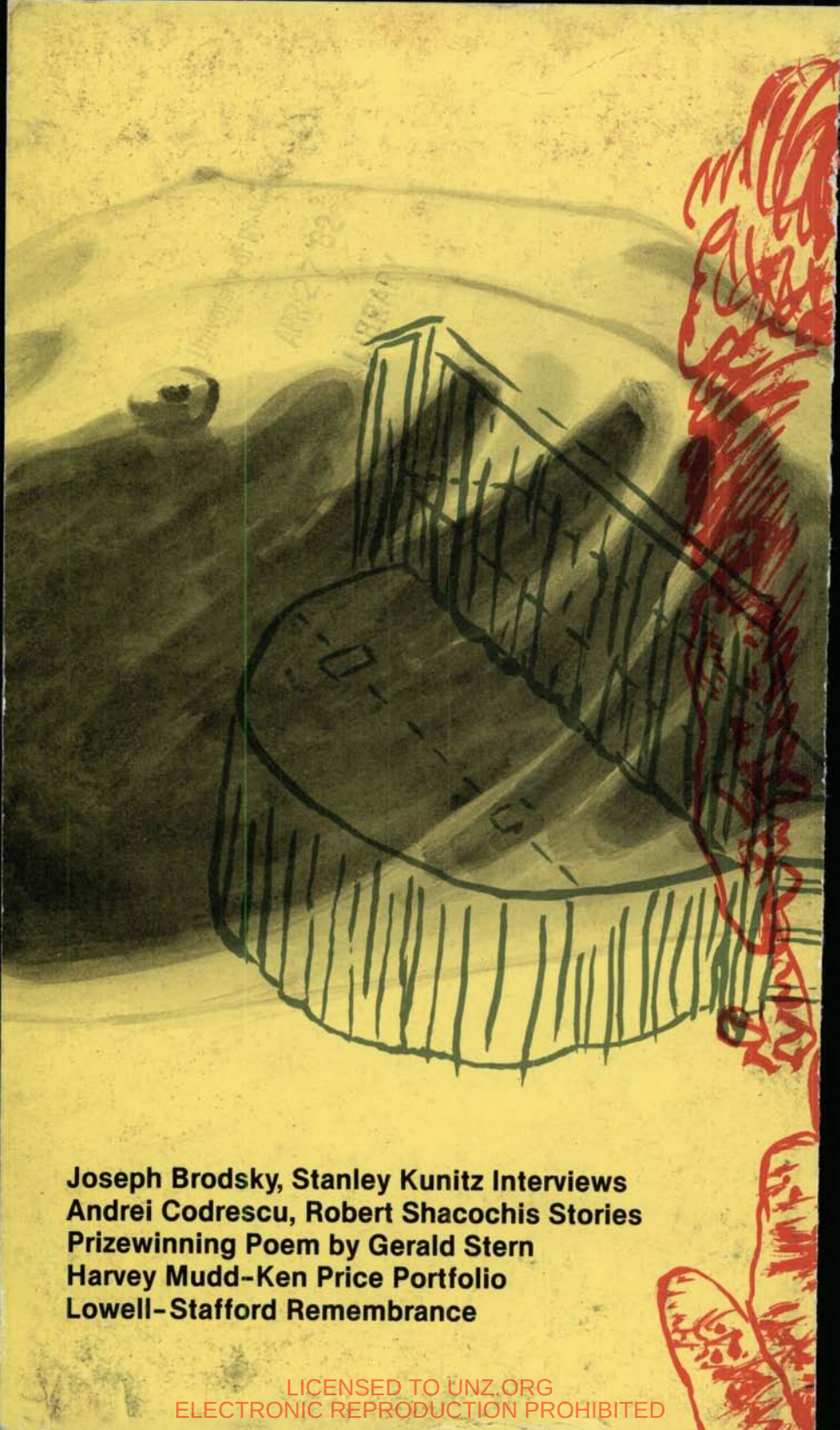
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